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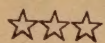
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The
STARLIT TRAIL



THE STARLIT TRAIL

BY
KING PHILLIPS

AUTHOR OF
THE PALM OF THE HOT HAND,
WILD PARADISE, ETC.



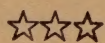
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The
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CHAPTER I

ORPHEUS IN SODA MESA DESERT

COMFORTABLY reclining at the edge of a water pocket, Reverdy plunked at his banjo. This was a rather curious procedure, because the water pocket had turned out to be only a dry saline with contour lines of incrustated sticks, stones, and salt particles that marked the successive periods of evaporation. The salt glistened in the starlight. Plunk Reverdy's hair—bronze in shade—glistened likewise as the hot wind tousled it.

"I knew a calf-kneed lady—"

So he sang—to his horse, his pack burro, and the stars.

"Down at old Pedro's bar."

Like the wild creatures that came to the call of Orpheus's divine lute, certain denizens of the Soda Mesa Desert were summoned by this strange rhythmic sound. First came a coyote, peering over a red rock—and looming almost as big as

a lobo there in the moonlight. Plunk Reverdy was of half a mind to draw his gun and blow the inquisitive, yellow-livered visitor off the ledge of that boulder. But he had just struck a new chord which demanded a finger on each of the four strings. It was a chord which he might have hunted all his life. Besides, he was not in the killing mood.

“ Her cheeks like ocotilla,
Whose flowers are red in spring,
Her hands like sojuaro
With prongs a-blossoming.”

Next there came a wild horse to the scene. He stood high up on the rim of the cliff on the other side of the cañon. His head was held aloft, his shaggy mane was tossing. Reverdy imagined that his nostrils quivered, but the beast was too far away and the light too dim to see this. And yet there he stood—as inquisitive as the measly coyote and considerably more appreciative. If he came too close Reverdy would have to be ready with his six-gun. No telling what these desert stallions would do to an unmounted man.

“ But one thing else I’ll tell yer,
Oh, Mr. Buckaroo,
Like any cholla cactus,
She’d stick you through and through!”

His voice rang with a haunting melody up and down that narrow arroyo. The wind might have carried it far across the breast of the desert, except that the rhythmic strains and the twanging of the banjo were caught in a labyrinth of gro-

tesque draws, precipices and barrancas which the centuries had carved. The strains were caught, tossed back and forth, recovered, and held finally as a song is eternally imprisoned in a shell.

Another denizen of the desert arrived. He was more hardened, and yet more tortured by the fierce heat, than that wild broncho on the cliff's edge or the coyote in search of the fountain of this music. The wild horse came perhaps because he had chanced to wander to leeward of Reverdy's pinto; the coyote came perhaps in search of water. But this other desert creature came most certainly because he had heard that melodious song wandering up through the arroyos.

It was a man.

Reverdy could see little of his face, because of the lop-brimmed sombrero. The long chin bristled with stubble, and a blobber lip was all that the starlight caught. The man wore rags—well torn by mesquite and cactus and splintered rock. Patches on his clothes were sewn with fiber of leather-wood bark; his old boots were tied up with buckeye twine.

"You sure are powerful happy, pard," he said to the minstrel. "Singing that-away. I figure there's plenty of water in this hole."

"Not very much."

The desert wanderer looked into the water pocket and saw what appeared to be a glistening bowl of salt.

"Nary a drop!" he exclaimed. "And yet you

can sing! Jest how do you do it, pard?"

"I've got a little left in my canteen. Half of it's yours."

The other reached out greedily.

"Well, I cain't exactly refuse, pard," he said.

"Haven't had a swig for three days except by cuttin' out a hollow place in cactus and waitin' for it to fill with sap. Which my stomach is on the bum likewise. Bein' I haven't et for three days."

"I've got enough and to spare," Reverdy said. "Half of the grub's yours also."

"Well, I must say, pard, you're white through and through. No, don't build a fire. Couldn't stand anythin' hot. I'm all het up enough already."

Reverdy watched him fall greedily to the duffel bag. Evidently his stomach had not been upset enough by sojuaro sap to prevent his eating. He ripped off the top of a can and gouged out the beans with his paw—precisely like a bear. His rapacity did not stop there, either, for he actually ate raw bacon, tearing at it with his yellow teeth without slicing the slab.

"How about making some flapjacks and coffee?" Reverdy suggested.

"Couldn't think of it, pard—couldn't think of it. A fire would make me crazy."

Reverdy was about to ask him just why he was so afraid of a fire; but it was rather too personal a question. For all he knew, the man was a fugitive.

"I reckon you think I'm an outlaw, pard?" the man said affably. "Don't blame you. Just look at me. Look at my clothes ripped all to pieces—and my feet. And my skin—all scratched up. Ever see any worse lookin' specimen of hooman? I reckon not."

Reverdy stared at him, almost laughing. The other went on:

"Well, leave me explain. My name's Podsnapper. Been huntin' for surface float, same as you. No water anywheres down there in the plain, which maybe you've found that out already.

"My hoss kicked off. My grubstake give out—bein' I couldn't pack much to start with when I hit back for civilization on foot.

"And now while I'm eatin' the rest of these beans I wish you'd reel off another verse or two of that song I heard a-floatin' up the cañon. For it shore has a soothin' effect on my sunburned ole carcass."

Reverdy could not help laughing at the audacity of the stranger, drinking his fill from the precious canteen, gorging himself from the duffel bag of provisions, and now demanding music with his meals.

The minstrel, however, was not the one to deny his guest. He had sung his songs gratis and played his banjo at many a cantina, and for the delectation of good men and bad. Orpheus drew no distinction between charming the savage beast and the gods on Olympus.

"I knew a calf-kneed lady
Down at old Pedro's bar.
And though her past was shady,
Her eye was like a star."

He sang with a big Napatan boot tapping softly and syncopatingly upon the hard packed sand. The melody softened all sounds—the champing of the horse, the loud guzzling of the stranger, the clatter of a tin can thrown far down into the boulder wash.

It had the same softening effect on these sounds as the starlight had on the fierce desolation of the gulch, the rocks, the red and gray strata of the cliffs.

The man who called himself Podsnapper threw away the last can he had opened and then walked over toward the singer. He stood looming against a great background of stars, nodding his head in cadence as if the music had taken possession of him:

"Oh, she'd stick you through and through!
She'd stick you through and through!
Like any cholla cactus
She'd stick you black and blue!
Oh, one thing else —"

The song broke off precipitously, as Reverdy saw the barrel of a gun twinkling in the starlight just in front of him.

"One thing else I'll tell yer,"

he resumed, trying to cover up that unfortunate stumbling on his lines—

"Oh, Mr. Buckaroo,
Like any cholla cactus
She'd stick you through and through."

It was no use. The stranger evidently had made up his mind to call some sort of a showdown, and it was futile for Reverdy to try stalling for time. He was not going to be allowed another second. Besides, the stranger had heard that slight check in the rhythm of the song—which in ragtime is disastrous. Everything was out of joint.

"Sorry, pard. You've treated me white; but it's got to be. I want your horse."

"*My horse!*" the other exclaimed. He burst out in an oath. He was really swearing at himself. He had known well enough that the stranger was crooked; and he had limbered his trigger finger, so to speak, keeping his eye open for any queer movement on the part of his guest.

But his guest had bided his time. Plunk's first moment of watchfulness was naturally relaxed. Then the stranger had waited for Plunk to occupy his hands with that banjo.

"Claw the air now, hombre," Mr. Podsnapper was saying quietly. "We won't need no fuss. Just leave me frisk you of your shootin' iron. Otherwise I don't reckon you'll part with your hoss peaceful like."

But, Reverdy objected to parting with his most precious possession "peaceful like," even with the odds a hundred to one against him. He was quick at the draw. His hand when plunking that banjo went so fast at times your eye could hardly follow it. It looked like three or four hands. He pretended to lift his arms, but his right came up

with the complicated movement of unbuttoning his holster flap and drawing a gun.

In that starlight it is conceivable that with some adversaries he might have gotten away with this desperate move. As it was, a flash of light spurted out of the stranger's hand. Plunk Reverdy's gun clattered to the rocks as a slug ripped his arm. A moment later the renegade, having picked this gun up, mounted the horse and rode off down the cañon.

Plunk waited, lying so that his wounded arm lay resting easily on the sand. He watched the retreating rider until the latter was swallowed up in the darkness of a clump of mesquite trees and piñons. Then, without taking the time to bind his wound, Plunk crawled over toward his saddle pack where he kept his rifle.

He loaded it with one hand, drew himself up to a standing posture, leaning against a boulder.

By this time the escaping rider had emerged from the piñon grove and was crossing a patch of black sage. His victim sighted on him, his shoulder pressing against the butt, the muzzle supported by the boulder, his left hand at the trigger.

Now the horse thief was past the black sage which had made a protective background for him against which he seemed almost invisible. But on riding out upon the moonlit sand he was clearly etched, and afforded a perfect although distant mark.

Plunk Reverdy fired.

The stranger lurched forward on the horse's withers as if he had been hit from behind by a crushing weight. The horse wheeled, ran to the side of the cañon, giving the appearance that no hand was at the reins, then stood pawing at the sand. A moment later he wheeled again, his head coming up sharply.

The rider was still on, but clinging, low crouched over the withers, as if tied there like an inert and shapeless thing—as, for instance, a saddle pack.

CHAPTER II

THE GIFT HORSE

ONE morning some days later Reverdy, having in a measure healed his crease with an application of peeled stems of prickly pear, awoke to the sound of hoofbeats.

They came from far down the cañon which was already suffused with the misty glow of sunrise. He saw a Mexican mozo—to all appearances a humpback—riding off, hell bent, for the open desert.

Whether this hombre had been snooping around Plunk's diggings with intent to steal or kill was not apparent. At any rate, by the frantic manner in which he kicked his heels into the shaggy pinto, he appeared to be in a mighty big hurry to get away.

The incident naturally enough brought Plunk to a sudden, complete awakening; and his eye ran back over the trail which the fugitive was covering. Down in the bed of the cañon, tethered to a dead sycamore, was a horse.

This was very peculiar—and intriguing. Plunk had no horse. He had traveled a few miles to water, with his burro, which because of that gun wound he had been forced to ride. A horse was

a very attractive animal at this juncture.

He went down and examined the strange creature — from a safe distance.

This was quite an ordinary old horse — a blood bay with a speckled face. The white dots over the forehead thickened down the cheeks until they merged into a gray and white about the nose. It reminded Plunk of the dim white stars that come out in the afterglow of sunset. There was a flecking of white over the croup, which looked like a scattering of cirrus clouds.

He was a gentle-looking critter, for his nose, unlike many of the bronchos of that country, was straight instead of being Roman, which is the sign of orneriness. Nor was he goose-rumped like many an outlaw Plunk had seen in his day.

With nostrils distended and sniffing gently, he watched the man approach. The results of his sniffing seemed to assure him that the stranger was a friend, and he resumed nibbling a patch of weed while he was being studied.

There was, in analysis, only one thing peculiar about this animal. His reins were crossed under his throat, and the bight, slung over his withers, terminated in a piece of white paper.

Now, there was nothing extraordinary about having his reins crossed. Plunk had seen many horses ridden that way. It was a good scheme for a stranger with a hard hand to ride a mount with a soft mouth.

But as to that paper —

"All right, old bronc, I'm coming up to you, so don't get scared."

Plunk circled the animal so as to approach him from the proper side. He expected a demonstration of some sort or other when he reached for that piece of paper; but nothing happened. Indeed, the old critter just went on nibbling, taking a step or two to the end of his hackamore which tethered him to the tree bole.

There was writing on the paper — a closely scrawled note evidently addressed to Plunk himself:

To the hombre which I stole his horse a few nights ago in White Lobo Gulch.

This was the gulch in which Reverdy and the man calling himself Podsnapper had made each other's acquaintance.

when you read this here note which Im dictatin same to the mucker whos been nursin me, why then Ile most like be daid and gone. so your listenin to a voice which its comin from the grave.

Reverdy flattened the paper out, for it was crumpled, and went on reading:

Now hombre you treated me white and in return I plugged you. but most like being I only hit you in the arm yore still alive and kickin and won't find much trouble in gettin out being you hev a burro. if yore dyin from the wound I giv you why then this letter aint goin to count and I figure Ile hev to burn in hell for a couple million years in payment for what I done.

A smile came over Reverdy's rugged face. It was the most peculiar document he had ever read

in his life—and delivered in a most peculiar way. He could not help but glance over to the old nag again. The animal was nibbling calmly enough at the patch of weed. The note went on:

But if you aint dead hombre then I reckon I kin make amends and I wont kick off with remorse twistin my soul like I had my nose in a tournkay. Im returnin your hoss.

No I dont mean your own hoss because same fell into a barranca and busted his laig. but Ime returnin one which is much better. a gentle ole critter which will foller you around like a kid brother. accept this hoss—a favorite of mine—and leave bygones be bygones. I forgiv you for that bit of led you sent me as a partin shot. which same is now festerin in my lung. but it ain't your fault. its mine, so goodbye hombre, and luck be with you.

From the peculiar state of uneasiness into which this "voice from the dead" had plunged him Reverdy turned to the contemplation of that gentle old cayuse.

Any man might have had an aversion for that animal from the very start; any man might have been justified in approaching him with a definite feeling of fear, or at least mistrust. But Reverdy, strangely enough, took an immediate liking to him.

And it appeared that the horse took a definite liking to Reverdy. The old plug rubbed his gray whiskered face against the man's shoulder as the latter was untying the hackamore from the bole. Then without taking up the slack in the rope he followed his new master out into an open space of sand in the boulder wash. He even prodded

Plunk with his nose—after the manner of a pet horse greeting a beloved owner.

There was no saddle. This meant there was something of hazard in vaulting to that bare back. But Plunk had no desire to ride all the way to Mule Town on a burro when he had a gentle-looking cayuse like this for a mount.

Putting a hand on the horse's withers—with-out, however, clutching the mane—he swung aboard. He held the reins, avoiding the slightest pull, mindful of the fact that a horse with crossed reins is naturally tender mouthed and given to rearing. Hence Plunk realized that to manage him necessitated the use of knees, the shifting of his weight, and the merest pressure of a crossed rein against the horse's neck.

Thus he rode. The horse stood for a moment, then responded to the signal of his rider's knees, and went up the cañon with the easiest canter Plunk had ever known.

A short workout and Plunk was satisfied. He returned to his camp, strapped what remained of his pack on the burro and started for home.

As he rode northward out of the Soda Mesa Desert and struck for Gold Pan Gulch and Mule Town, he wondered just what this gift horse signified.

Had Podsnapper really experienced a fit of remorse? He had given little evidence of being that sort of man. Yet on a deathbed strange conversions are liable to take place.

As Plunk felt the easy-riding, patient old critter ambling along the trail, he was inclined to think that that desert scarecrow who had robbed him of his food and water and his mount had actually—as a last act of his life—tried to make amends. And yet—

Reverdy drowned his misgivings in song, raising his voice against the red, sun-baked cliffs:

“Oh, the bandit, he’s plumb ornery, plumb
ornery, plumb ornery,
Oh, the bandit, he’s plumb ornery and like-
wise, too, he drinks.
And if you ever cross his trail
Say Buenos Dios, but don’t fail
To throw yore six-gun on his tail
Afore an eye he blinks.”

CHAPTER III

TARANTE

BEFORE arriving at Mule Town, Reverdy stopped at a cow outfit just on the edge of the desert.

A group of men lolled about the veranda of the main shack and in their midst was a stocky, wrinkled gentleman with a long gray mustache, a bearskin vest and a rusty star.

It was a pleasant scene for one returning from the fires of Soda Mesa Desert. Pleasant was the mooing of the cows for their calves in separate corrals; pleasant was the fiddling of locusts, and pleasant was the sound of water from the artesian well, gurgling from a pipe and sparkling down the irrigation ditches.

The man with the star stopped—evidently in the climax of his recital—and greeted Plunk Reverdy. He greeted him as a father greets a son; and the cowboys took him in their arms as brothers receiving one who has long been lost; the old ranch wife greeted him as a mother—and immediately bustled about preparing a feast.

As Plunk basked in these affections he was thinking to himself no doubt of how he would relate his adventures. He was by nature very

proud; he had a name as a sharpshooter and a fighter who always won his duels.

This time he would have to explain of course how he had lost his mount—and how he had received that wound in the arm. He would have to explain likewise that the man he shot had managed to get away. And while explaining these points it would be necessary to assume a becoming modesty.

No one in fact had ever known him to brag. The narration of his exploits generally had to be coaxed from him. But that does not mean that he had any false modesty. He had a fine sense of pride—the right kind of pride.

I mention these points of his character because they throw much light on what happened in the following conversation with Sheriff Hornuff.

That official, after the greetings were over, went on with his recital:

“I’ve just been down to Sody Mesa myself, Plunk,” he said. “We might have run into each other, in fact. You say your last diggins was down near White Lobo Gulch. Well, I’ve been further south than that this trip. Was trailin’ a ornery skunk by the name of Tarante—”

“Name of what?”

“Tarante,” the sheriff answered. “Ain’t you ever heard of Tarante, the outlaw?”

“Yes—I have—somewhere,” Plunk agreed.

“But didn’t know what he looked like.”

“Well, I did. Had his measurements and such

from the pen. He escaped some time ago, and has been killin' every gent he speaks to ever since. Had the Mexes and Injuns scairt stiff of him.

"He boasted that no man in the world would ever stand up to him face to face and fight. The only way *he'd* ever get caught was to be sniped from the chaparral somewheres and get it in the back.

"His eyes—so the renegades down in the desert said—would freeze a man so's he couldn't pull the trigger. Somebody who was afraid to walk up to him and fight plugged him in the back—and at a good safe range. Whoever that was—he was wise, I'll say! "

Plunk Reverdy's heart was beating swiftly. He held his breath—and then tried to say calmly:

"This shot from behind, chief—did it get him? "

"Well, I'll smile! Did it get him? He died a slow, long, lingerin', remorseful death with a hole right between the shoulder blades."

Plunk looked around at the cowboys. He was itching to say: "I'm the man that fired that long range shot." But something had taken all the wind out of his sails. He noticed that the emphasis was not put on the long range—but on the fact that it got the bandit in the back—a bandit who had boasted that no man could get him any other way!

Well, this was tough luck—but it was no great matter. Why say anything about it? Every one

knew Plunk was a good shot anyway.

"I went down there," the sheriff was saying, "to get him daid or alive. Well, I found him half way between. He was in a Mexican posada, right in the next room, and I heard him groan-in' and swearin' he'd get even. There waren't nobody down there to help him much 'ceptin' a Papago witch doctor.

"And I figure he hastened the end, if anything. I heard the bandit callin' to his henchmen—which there waren't any of 'em around—and tellin' 'em he wanted 'em to go and find this hombre, and plug him. Then he sort of eased up, and said, 'No matter.' He'd get him himself. He had a way! "

"What way do you reckon that was, chief?" asked one of the stockmen.

"Don't know. Just delirium, I figure. He give what money he had to a mozo which worked at the posada, and told him to go and get an old hoss which months ago he'd left at a ranch somewheres."

"And what was he to do with the horse?" Plunk asked.

The answer to this question might satisfy a curious doubt that had arisen in his mind.

But the sheriff could give no answer. "Don't know," he said. "I went into the room. The mozo was scairt stiff of my star and wouldn't say anything. And he didn't go after no hoss either. Leastwise not while I was anywheres around

watchin' him. Well, pretty soon, the bandit seen my star and laughed. He asked me how fur did I figure I'd trail him now?

"I said not much further. He was as good for my intents and purposes whether daid or alive. Well, he kep' on laffin'—his glazed eyes fixed on my star—and then he kicked off."

The group of listeners—the cowboys, the foreman and the ranch owner—made their eulogies. It was a good day for them. Tarante had been feared. Their sheriff was a hero.

"Only I was sorry he died," said the latter, chewing thoughtfully at his gray mustache, which was a habit of his.

"Sorry!" they exclaimed. "Now what're you handin' us?"

"I'm sorry that he could boast of dyin' with a slug in the back. I'm sorry too that it warden't me that had the final chanst at him. And I wouldn't of given it to him in the back either. If it had been me—I'd of met him face to face!"

Reverdy made a move—as if to say something—to explain that lots of times you can't get a man to stand just the way you want when you plug him.

Then it was that one of the cowboys noticed his right arm and the bandages showing under the sleeve.

"What-all happened to *you*, Plunk?"

Again Reverdy found himself on the verge of explaining. He had a good killing to his credit.

But what credit is it to a man when you have to bolster up the deed with explanations?

Of course, he *could* explain. It was easy enough. But Reverdy had a very sensitive sort of pride.

"This?" he repeated—glancing at his arm. "Oh, nothing, gents. Just had a little set-to with a Papago renegade. Nothing to interest you. Just a personal matter—as you might say."

They saw he did not want to talk further. "A personal matter" with gunshooting was a point that a man in that part of the country had a perfect right to refuse to discuss.

Even the sheriff—looking Plunk in the eye—chewed the end of his long gray mustache—and said nothing.

CHAPTER IV

HELL FOR LEATHER

MULE TOWN was transfigured in the Saturday night illumination. Cantinas poured out their yellow beams across board sidewalks. The sand of the main street glittered in the light of the stars; Puma Mesa ordinarily a smirch of ghastly red, reflected from its surface of denuded iron and shale a soft and ethereal radiance.

Mechanical pianos banged out; the guitars on the Mexican side of the main street twanged *La Paloma*; cowherders and muckers, who had come to town to celebrate, made the night at once hideous and joyful. Honky-tonks were clamorous with yipping, singing and fighting.

Then there was something of a cessation—like frogs stopping their croaking at the approach of a greater power.

Cowboys and muckers crowded into the Rex Cantina. The veterinary went there; the stage-driver went there; the Japanese who kept the chowcart went there; the barber, the sutler, the harness-maker went there. From across the street the Papagos and greasers flocked and stood without the swinging doors listening.

A song filtered out into the starlight.

"Oh, the bandit is plumb ornery, plumb ornery, plumb ornery,
Oh, the bandit he's plumb ornery, and like wise, too, he drinks."

"It's Plunk Reverdy with his banjo!" declared one. "He just come horsin' into town from his desert diggin's ridin' a gentle ole bronc with stars on its nose."

"Plunk Reverdy, is it!" remarked another. "I've heard tell the whole town congregates for to hear his voice. And the men all stop fightin'—"

"And the gals all weep—"

"And the cows stop millin'—"

"Come on in!" cried a buckaroo. "We cain't hardly afford to miss this!"

Two locomotive headlights fixed on either end of the gaming room and used as "spots" were focused upon a rather gaunt, windburned youth. Despite the glare, his eyes were a clear piercing gray accustomed to a desert sun. The spotlights illuminated a leathery neck, a woolen shirt, a bear-skin vest and khaki trousers.

The performer was seated high upon a throne, which a few minutes before had been a gaming table. In fact, the chips of the stud that had been in circulation during that game now jingled merrily as the youth tapped his Napatan boot in syn-copation to his tune.

"And if you ever cross his trail,
Say Buenos Dios, but don't fail
To throw your six-gun on his tail—"

Plunk Reverdy looked down at the faces, close herded all about him.

Next to the table were the gamblers whose game had stopped in his honor—a card in front of each chair with four cards upturned. Jammed about them were cantina girls, a palmist, a bar-keep and the humpback whom the proprietor hired for luck.

Stockmen from the range to the north, and muckers from the desert to the south were on the floor ten deep. Off in the lobby through a great doorway you could see Mule Town's aristocracy. The Rex Cantina was also a hotel—the most respectable hotel in Mule Town.

A gentleman with silvery locks and a white goatee, and holding a dusty black sombrero in his lap, was seated on a bench on the staircase landing. Next to him directly under a lamp was a girl with black ringlets, a sad, handsome face and dark eyes that were focused intently upon the Rex Cantina's star performer. Perhaps she was wishing that she could enter the forbidden ground of that dance hall.

The last time Plunk had seen this girl she had those same black ringlets. But she was then a gawky child with a pretty face, thin freckled arms and feet that stepped on each other. A few years had elapsed. He remembered something about her being sent to Phoenix to school.

The childish curves of her face had gone; but curves had come to her gawky arms. It had taken

four years of Phoenix to erase those freckles. It had taken four years to make her perfect.

With the gullibility of any actor, Plunk Reverdy was of the opinion that his songs had made her wistful. But when he sang a funny song to cheer her up, he saw that she was sadder than ever.

"Sing us 'Old Black Joe,' Plunk—that's what we're waitin' for!" some one called out.

"No, sing us somethin' so's we kin dance," said one of the cantina girls. "And sing without your banjo so's we kin dance with *you*."

"Stay up thar on the table where you belong!" cried a cowpuncher. "Leave us do the dancin'. Give us that one about 'Cactus Kate'."

"And then sing about 'Coyote Jim' and the 'Foundlin' Kid'!"

"And then about 'Hell and Nell Carson'!"

Plunk tuned up again. "You all want weepy songs. But this is Saturday night. Wait till Sunday morning for weeping! Here goes a lively one so's we can have a little hell for leather!"

They took their partners. The big herders, with girls in their arms, sent the crowd jamming against the side of the dance floor. Then they danced the Texas Tommy around the old worn-out groove on the floor, shuffling and kicking away the sawdust and sand.

It was the liveliest tune of Plunk Reverdy's repertoire, played solely for the benefit of that girl with the black ringlets seated in the hotel al-

cove with the distinguished, white-bearded man.

When the tune was over Plunk looked across the heads of the couples to the hotel doorway—and saw her crying.

“Well, it’s no use, I’m through,” he said. “The evenin’s performance is a freeze.”

“Oh, you ain’t goin’ to hesitate now, Plunk-ety!” they cried. “Don’t forget your ole pals!”

“Don’t leave us in misery, Plunk! Nothin’ to dance to but the pianola!”

“And the pianola won’t work!” said the bar-keep, “bein’ it’s been pawin’ and hoofin’ and rarin’ all evenin’.”

“Another jig, Plunk, for the sake of these gals who all love you.”

Reverdy tried again. Perhaps he could make that girl, over there under the lamp of the vestibule, smile.

He tuned up. There was a silence, merging softly into rhythm of soft chords and shuffling feet. It increased to a furious syncopation with cowboy heels pounding the old puncheon floor. Reverdy’s arm was going so fast you could see three instead of one. His song was as merry and uproarious as any coon-shouting ever heard in Mule Town—but his face was drawn.

The girl over there was watching him. She was wondering perhaps what made his face so gray. The dancers didn’t wonder—or even look. They would pay the piper in any coin he asked. Only he never asked for payment—except the

effervescent payment of a fishbowl of lager—or the still more effervescent payment of adulation.

He didn't finish this particular performance. He slid down from the table—almost as if he had fallen.

"What the hell's got you, Plunk!" one of his cronies asked in alarm.

"He's been out in the desert—we forgot that—" said a cantina girl.

"His hand is all red—the one he was playin' with."

"Come on and have a drink on the house, Plunk—and all in the house drink to him."

Three or four of the cowboys bore him along to the bar—for he appeared to be heavy on his knees.

"He's been playin' all evenin' with a wounded arm, so help me!" a girl cried. She unbuttoned his sleeve.

He was grinning—as the veterinary held a glass to his lips.

"His arm's all taped," the cantina girl declared. "And he was playin' for you, and you sheep-headed coots danced! Look at him!"

"Oh, hell—it's only a crease," said Plunk. "Got it out there—fightin' a Papago rustler. Forget it!"

They plied him with drinks. They brought water from somewhere or other, and bandages, and tape. The horse doctor was the leading actor for a moment.

No, not the leading actor exactly—Plunk was that. He was as much of a hero as if he had saved the town from a raid. I might venture to say that if they knew he had just killed a deadly bandit down in Soda Mesa Desert, they would not have idolized him more.

He looked up—glancing into the hotel alcove at the dark-eyed girl under the lamp. She was still with her distinguished old companion. Yes, she had been crying.

But her expression was changed now. Her eyes were flaming. She looked at this peculiar, banjo-playing hero from the desert, and smiled.

"Well, gents—and gals," Plunk said. "It was worth it."

The man with the best physique in the house—I mean Plunk Reverdy—and the man with the worst, stood side by side at the bar. The latter, in a manner of speaking, had edged his way under the legs of the crowd that surrounded Mule Town's favorite native son. It was Hump Pablo, God of Chance, Mascot of the Rex Cantina.

"I want to buy him a drink!"

"Hump wants to buy him a drink!" they repeated.

"This'll mean good luck for you, Plunk!" said the gamblers.

In the performance of this ritual, Hump Pablo found occasion to stand on the rail, and lift his gnarled, wrinkled head toward Reverdy's ear.

"She wants to see you—that gal out in the vestibule."

Plunk turned sharply upon him.

"Go easy now," said the dwarf. "Wait till that ole bird with the white beard comes in to spend what's left of his jack on the faro table."

Reverdy glanced away—this time to the speckled mirror. All sorts of things were written on that mirror in flour and lard. Some one had designed an eagle and flag and scrolls. But through it all he could see the girl off there in the vestibule, with her white-bearded, silvery haired companion. He watched her for a long time.

There were not many girls like her. In fact there was no girl like her in Mule Town. With the exception of Mexican women, and the cantina girls, and a few squaws, womankind was not well represented in this municipality.

Of course there were plenty of rancher's wives and daughters. But they considered Mule Town a good place to stay out of on Saturday nights. The only respectable place in town was the Rex Hotel, which opened upon the Rex Gaming Parlors and Dance Hall, by a door big enough to drive a stage-coach through.

With the cessation of music, the crowd thinned. You could hear the mournful twang of guitars from the Mexican side of the street. The doorways cleared of their crowd. The gamblers resumed their monte, stud and faro.

At one table miners were betting prodigious sums on which direction an ant, placed within a chalk-marked circle, would crawl.

This particular game intrigued the old man with the black sombrero, the silvery locks and the goatee. You can teach a faro table to do tricks, this old man decided, but an ant is fundamentally honest.

"I'm bettin' three hundred dollars," he said, "that this insect will crawl in the direction of the bar. Being ants are known to have as good sense as humans."

"I'm bettin' three hundred," said the veterinary, "that this here animal will crawl in the direction of the water-trough outside. Bein' a ant has an instinct for findin' what he wants—even quicker than a burro kin smell a water-hole in the desert."

"An ant don't generally want water," said the barber. "So I'm bettin' he'll crawl towards my shavin' parlor, bein' they's an ant-hill just under the step. And this ant's been havin' such a hot time settlin' bets, that I figure he'll be plumb sot on goin' home."

The croupier, who held a long forefinger lightly pressing the ant against the green baize, released the pressure and everybody watched breathlessly.

It seemed that he had pressed a little too heavily, for the ant couldn't get up.

"He's plumb exhausted," said one.

"You've squashed him," said another. "Look at his forefeet wigglin' and champin'."

"He's only scratchin' his haid," said the barkeep. "Kin you blame a ant for stoppin' to think when they's nine hundred dollars at stake?"

"He ain't thinkin'! He's wigglin' like a calf that's been roped and hog tied. Which it's my opinion that the croupier squashed him."

"He's goin' home!" cried the barber.

"No he's going' to the water trough!" said the veterinary.

"He's ruminatin'!" said one of the onlookers. "Now he's trailin' off toward the bar."

"Which shows he's a good native son!" said the old stranger with the black sombrero.

"Consarn the pestiferous little tick! He can't make up his mind."

Plunk Reverdy had already made up his mind which way to go.

Before waiting for the momentous decision to be handed down by that ant, Plunk left the crowd, now unnoticed, and slipped out to the vestibule.

The girl with the black ringlets was waiting for him.

CHAPTER V

NELL BROWER

THE girl turned a curiously radiant face up toward him—radiant partly because of the oil lamp shedding amber beams upon her forehead; and because, no doubt, her skin was delicate for that sun-baked part of the country.

I imagine that some one going through a gallery of many uninteresting pictures, and lighting finally upon one that had been eagerly looked for, might have had an expression somewhat like that girl's.

Reverdy went close to her—so close that he might have counted the three light freckles recently brought out by Arizona on her chin. Plunk was a happy-go-lucky sort of fellow, and never took womenfolk very seriously. So he was not embarrassed. Besides he had been fussed over by a lot of Mule Town's feminine contingent.

He judged she was going to say something about how she enjoyed his voice.

"Do you remember me, Plunk?"

"Of course I do. You're Jackson Brower's grandchild."

"Do you remember teaching me to rope a calf out on the ranch?"

Plunk laughed. "I remember you long before that when you had two missing teeth and chapped knees and—"

"You never mentioned that then. You sang about me and called me Black-eyed Susan and Juanita and Nelly Gray and—"

"I knew you were growing up," he said, which was as big a whopper as any man ever told. If you had prophesied what that tough little ragamuffin was going to develop into Plunk would have been the last to believe.

"I'll come out with it without any hedging," she said. "I want you to go on a dangerous journey."

He answered without any hedging too. "I'll go."

"It's through the Soda Mesa Desert."

"There's nothing dangerous there," Plunk said. He added, realizing that he had stretched a point. "Not if you have plenty of water."

"The sheriff said there were bandits."

"None with clean guns," said Plunk. He burned with a desire to recount his recent very romantic experience with the deadly gentleman known as Tarante. But he was a youth of finely educated pride—a fact that always kept him from boasting. Besides he would rather have posed before her as a hero who had killed seven outlaws when they were face to face with him!

This story of shooting a man in the back was only worth telling when you could impress upon

the listener the remarkable distance of the shot. And that was proverbially a point of exaggeration. It resembled, for instance, boasting of the size of a fish which had gotten away.

"My grandfather," the girl was explaining, "is a fine old gentleman of fighting stock. You saw him in there—"

Plunk nodded his head. "We all know Jackson Brower." He was about to say that the old fellow was at that moment betting large sums on the peregrinations of an ant. But the girl went on eagerly:

"He has a claim down below Soda Mesa and he's taking his whole household with him. If I told him that I was trying to pick out the best man in Mule Town to go with him across the desert and protect him he would never forgive me. But you see there will be two women with him, a little boy and two Mexican hostlers whom I don't trust."

"And you—"

"Oh, no. I'm staying here. I have work to do in Mule Town. A sort of missionary's job. I have just been appointed by the Agent to teach a school of Navajo children. Letting my poor old grandfather go out there without me has made me think a lot. He is the dearest thing in the world that I possess.

"The sheriff said he must not go alone—which made him laugh. My grandfather said he could take care of two women and a little boy—

as well as any deputy the sheriff picked out. Then the sheriff came to me and talked it over. The two Mexicans, he said, would leave us the moment our water gave out. Then there are mirages and a lot of deep arroyos that get you twisted —”

“I reckon some one’s told you the truth about Soda Mesa,” Plunk said. “I’ve been born and raised in this part of the country and if you want to find out where hell is—you don’t have to go any further than just beyond the first sierra you see looking toward Mexico.”

“The sheriff said he would appoint a deputy. But I said I wanted to look the man over first and pick out the right man. I picked you out when I saw you making those crazy people in there dance when you had a wounded arm.”

A blush went across Plunk’s jovial tanned face. It was, of course, a blush of tremendous delight.

“Well, I accept the nomination, girl.”

“But, no! First I want to hear you give me your word that you’ll take them through safe. No matter what happens—they must be safe. If anything should happen to my poor old granddad —”

“It won’t till I’m plugged, quartered, and buried under six feet of adobe mud,” said Plunk.

She took the hand he held out. She took it gently, as if mindful that the wound he had there must still be a painful one.

“Where’ll you be when I get back?” he asked bluntly.

She looked up quickly, her face lighted.

"Where we used to meet!" she said. "I remember—it was in the calf corral near the water tower."

"I'll be there a week from to-night," he said.

"So will I." Then she added the condition: "If you come with the news that granddad is safely on the other side of Soda Mesa."

This condition did not worry Plunk. He left her, his heart singing, and went in to see old Jackson Brower.

Now this interview was a delicate one. Jackson Brower had no conception that he was growing old. He could still take care of himself in the desert—as he had done for fifty years of work among miners and assay shops. He was a fro-tiersman dyed in the wool.

"Do you remember me, pard?" Reverdy said to him.

It was a recess in the ant game. The "court" had temporarily adjourned because of his inability to make up his mind. The ant had curled up on the baize and lay on his back trying to uncurl himself; and no amount of prodding from Jackson Brower's pencil, or the veterinary's corkscrew, or the barber's toothpick would set him on his feet.

"Do I remember you?" the old fellow said genially. "Why dad burn my hide, of course I do! Been listenin' to them fool love songs of yours all evenin'. You're Plunk Reverdy. Used to bust broncs up to my ranch." He took the

youth's hand and reached up and slapped him on the stalwart back.

"Still the same lanky young shaver—eh, Plunk? 'Cept your muscles are harder and your hide thicker."

"Well pard, I'm on my way down across the desert—maybe taking the same trail as you. I thought considering there are a lot of bad men and renegade Indians hanging around down there, we might take the trail together."

"Who's afraid of bad men and Injuns?" the old fellow snorted.

"Well, they're always starved when they get chased down that direction. Can't tell what they'll do."

Old Jackson Brower chuckled. "That beats me. A fellow of your size worryin' about Injuns. Well—still and all—Plunk I'd admire to have you in my party. Come along. I'll see that the Injuns don't hurt you."

"I'd be much obliged for that," Plunk said with diplomacy.

"I see you've got a crease thar in your arm, too," the old frontiersman observed with less of scorn. "Wouldn't want a fine young coot like you to git into trouble with Injuns and such when you can't protect yourself. You come along."

"When do you start?"

"Sunrise. Got a good hoss? All right. It's a go. Come along. Glad to have you—and I'll see that you git through safe."

The town barber returned now:

"Are we goin' to play some more, pard?" he asked of old Brower.

"Play until mo'nin'!" said Brower.

"Good!" said the barber. "I've just been out to change my luck."

"Where you been?"

"Over to my ant-hill, to git another judge."

CHAPTER VI

“WHO’S GOING TO GET ME?”

IN Mule Town a young man’s fancy—when turning to thoughts of love—is beguiled by the palmist at the Rex Cantina.

It was late. The palmist was closing up her booth at the lower end of the dance floor. “Look here, old lady,” Plunk said. “Get out your pack of cards and answer me a question: Am I going to marry a girl with black ringlets and big dark eyes, and three freckles on her chin?”

Augustina, wrinkled, gray-haired witch that she was, appeared eager enough to unburden herself of a prophecy, which had been fermenting in her mind all evening.

She took Plunk’s hand.

“*Por Dios!* There is blood on this hand!” she cried with considerable dramatic expression.

This did not strike Reverdy as much of a miracle in second sight, as everyone in the cantina had witnessed the fact that his hand had bled when he played that last rollicking jig on his banjo.

“You have killed a man!” the crone announced, looking up with smoldering eyes.

This was more to the point. But yet a rather

simple deduction, inasmuch as Plunk had confessed to a gunfight with a "Mexican rustler."

"What I want to know, old lady," he objected, "is not what man I got—but who's going to get me. I mean who's going to marry me?"

She disregarded this, clinging tenaciously to the same thread: "It is a deadly bandit that you have sent into eternal torment."

Now this was considerably more serious. The old witch was heading for something. And Plunk had a disagreeable feeling that she knew more than she ought to.

"You shot him in the back. And he gave up the ghost, returning to hell where he was bred."

Plunk Reverdy shoved back his chair, suppressing an oath of surprise as well as anger. But he did not get up. He thrust his wounded hand out again so that her shriveled fingers could trace the lines of his palm. He would let her tell what she knew—with all the embellishments dear to her theatrical old heart.

"And you have his horse."

"Good God, *señora*, you've got some imagination."

"You think I am spinning lies—from imagination? Instead of from the fire of the gods?"

"Where do you get this idea of a horse?"

She changed her voice. Plunk himself was of the "profession." I mean he was something of an actor—just as she was. What was the use of wasting her words?

"I want to help you. To warn you. For you need help more than any other man in this world."

It was quite possible that Augustina had a soft spot in her shabby old heart for this care-free youth.

She went on—in a completely different lingo: "Some Mexican herders told me what happened in a posada—down below Soda Mesa. Tarante, the bandit, came in with a wound in his back. He swore eternal vengeance on the man who had inflicted that wound. A sniveling coward, so he said, had hidden behind a rock and hit him at long range."

This struck Plunk to the quick, and he drew back his hand.

"Plunk Reverdy—you are a very proud youth!" old Augustina mumbled wisely. "That is the one line written in your hand more vividly than all the others. You could cut your hands this way and that with scars but you could not take away that line of pride. You could crucify your hand with a nail, but your pride would ride over the pain, and the line would still be drawn there—as it was first drawn by the Creator."

"Wonderful words, old lady," said her client. "But am I going to marry a girl with black ringlets and three—"

"One warning I will leave with you, youth, before you go out into Soda Mesa Desert. I am an old woman—and a wise one. I am the seventh daughter of a seventh son! The Witch of Endor was my ancestress.

"When I saw you look at that dark-haired girl, I saw her eyes—and yours, burst into flame. I knew then that you would come to me. No, you will not find love there. That is your answer."

"You're a crazy old woman!"

"Maybe you'll ask me why?" She stopped him from leaving the table, clutching at his sleeve with her talons. "I'll tell you why. Because if you are wise you will refuse the quest she has sent you on."

"Oh, yes. Like hell."

"If you go to the desert, you will be destroyed."

Plunk Reverdy was now laughing. "Forget it, and I'll buy you a drink, and give you a couple of bucks. And we part friends, as usual."

"It is because we are friends, that I am begging you to hearken to my voice." She discarded all theatricality, and pleaded, precisely like an old woman pleading with a refractory boy—yes, even a son. Everybody, as I have said, loved Plunk Reverdy.

"My poor unfortunate youth! Condemned by the Fates and Destiny!"

He found he would have to tear his shirt to get free of those bird-like fingers.

"I am telling you once, Plunk Reverdy—and only this once: Tarante will get his revenge—as he swore he would on his death-bed."

Plunk did not think it necessary to explain to her that he had reformed on his death-bed and

sent his forgiveness with a gift.

“He will get his revenge by all the gods in Heaven—and you can not escape it.”

“I thought I heard you say just now, that Tarante is dead.”

“Dead! Yes, of course! But *por Dios*, my dear and condemned youth! What difference can that make! ”

Plunk left her peremptorily. And his shirt sleeve was torn.

But that mattered little. Rather than study Augustina the palmist, it was much more fun to observe the vagaries of the barber’s, the barkeep’s, and old Brower’s whimsical ant.

CHAPTER VII

THE EMBARKATION

A STRING of horses stood, dumb and inscrutable, at the water trough in front of the Rex Cantina and Hotel. It was just before dawn, and all the shacks of Mule Town—gray formless beings with eyeless sockets—waited, likewise dumb and inscrutable.

Puma Mesa seemed to overhang the sleeping settlement. Its rugged façade of lignite and quartz, having caught the first rays, was a livid flame of red. A great fire, so to speak, had leaped upon the town catching it unawares before sunrise. There had been an intense darkness, then—as if some witch doctor had performed a miracle—a mountain appeared right over your shoulder illuminated so clearly that every boulder and piñon on it was clearly etched.

In the gloom below, the train of pack mules, saddle horses, covered wagon and old Jackson Brower's household goods were starting for the desert trail.

It was the first look Plunk Reverdy had of his protégés. Old Jackson and the girl had not yet appeared. But there were two Mexicans, a squat breed with Papago blood who was the horse

wrangler; and a slight, poetical gentleman from Nogales with a downy mustache, who was the cook.

There was also a shriveled Kentuckian woman—something over eighty—who was Jackson Brower's aunt.

A large fleshy lady, who was always steaming except on this particular morning, which was the only time Plunk ever remembered seeing her cool, was packing fly-dope, permanganate for snake bites, a bobbinet and soap in a carpet-bag. Her son, a freckled-faced lad with two missing teeth and red hair was pestering Plunk Reverdy with questions, about mules, sawback saddles, derringers and kit knives.

And there was also one other character—famous in Mule Town—who for some reason or other had turned up at this most significant moment. You might liken the departure of a covered wagon and a mule train for the Soda Mesa Desert to the common scene of old days when a ship put out to sea for a distant and perilous port. It was an occasion.

And the more fuss that was made and the more ceremony about putting off—the more uncertainty seemed to arise concerning the ship ever coming back. The embarkation for Soda Mesa Desert had these dramatic attributes. Indeed, the sheriff himself rolled out of his bunk in the pitch dark, pulled on his boots, and came to the Rex Hotel to bid the party Godspeed.

He was a quiet-voiced insignificant little man standing there. But when he lit a Mexican cheroot you could see the clear blue eyes with the habitual squint from too much staring at sun-swept alkaline plains. You could see his long, gray mustache and jaw, big, red, and bristling with a white stubble. It was like a plentiful shaking of salt on raw beef.

He went to Plunk—who was answering three questions at once—propounded to him by the red-haired boy.

"I'd admire for to talk to you a minute, Plunk," said the sheriff.

Reverdy knew that Sheriff Hornuff took things over-seriously, particularly when womenfolk and old men were concerned. Reverdy was his opposite. The journey was an adventure for him.

The shriveled Kentucky woman, the fat lady, the red-haired boy, the wrangler and the poetic cook gathered about.

"I'm appointin' you a deputy for this here occasion," said Sheriff Hornuff with great ceremony. "And I want to know if you're totin' a gun which is clean, and a horse which you kin trust it on all occasions."

The newly appointed deputy showed his chief his six-gun—and the latter went through the performance of inspecting arms, in a truly military manner. It got everybody nervously interested—which was one of the main reasons why the sheriff insisted upon it. Of course he knew well enough

that the cleanest six-gun in Mule Town would probably be found in Plunk Reverdy's holster.

"And now your horse," he said.

"You've seen the horse already—down at the Bar Ace yesterday."

"Didn't examine him careful," said the sheriff, going to the mount.

Now Sheriff Hornuff knew the horses of all the men in that range. It was a sort of Bertillon fingerprint system with him whereby he catalogued the population of Mule Town, Cobb's Coulee and the surrounding ranges. He could rarely remember a man's face, never his name, but he could always remember the horse he rode.

"Where did you git this here gray-whiskered fuzz-tail?"

"A Mex in the desert gave him to me," said Plunk, "in return for my pinto."

"H'm! Never seen him before. And he ain't no wild cuitan which has just been broke either. A gentle ole stock hoss I take it." He examined his teeth by the light of the lantern Plunk held up. Then he examined his head, his withers, his body, his legs, his hoofs. "Hoofs as hard as flint—and no shoes. A well broke stock hoss which has been runnin' wild some time I take it. He'll be good for eatin' up desert trail."

He then stood off and squinted at him as an artist examining a picture. The horse meanwhile moved toward Plunk and laid the side of his face against Plunk's shoulder.

"The gentlest hoss that ever breathed," said Plunk. "I'm goin' to let this little kid ride him for a while."

"Oh, I kin ride 'im all right," said the boy with the two missing eye teeth. "Ain't no doubt about me handlin' 'im."

"Well, he passes muster," adjudged the sheriff. "All right get to your mounts and tell old Brower we're ready." Sheriff Hornuff drew Plunk aside.

"Now then Plunk, your hoss and your weapon satisfies me— And now I'm wonderin' about *you*."

"That's kind of a ornery statement, chief," Plunk said with something of a chip on his shoulder.

The other went on earnestly: "I want to impress on you, my boy, that this ain't no play—like for instance playin' songs and gettin' all the cantina gals to fall in love with you.

"In plain terms, Plunk, I'm trustin' you with the life of that thar old thoroughbred, Jackson Brower. And of the old lady in the covered wagon there fussin' with her carpet-bags; and of the boy, too, and of his maw; and of the two Mex mozos, which they ain't overly important.

"If anything happens to the Mexes we might let you off on extenuatin' circumstances. But concernin' that gal's granddad, they ain't no extenuatin' circumstances if anything happens to him. I had a talk with her—and I give her my word that you would handle this thing right."

"I gave her my word likewise, chief," Plunk said.

They shook. And as the sheriff's hand grasped Plunk's the latter felt for the first time the seriousness of his mission. Old Sheriff Hornuff must have imparted a vital sort of responsibility through his handclasp. He had succeeded in making the happy-go-lucky Plunk feel anxious for the safety of six human lives!

When they next met each other Reverdy and old Hornuff did not shake hands.

CHAPTER VIII

SODA MESA DESERT

SODA MESA DESERT was a land the buzzards had some time since forsaken.

It was a panorama of splintered peaks, mesas of gray slack banded with glaring red and yellow strata; arroyos that even a coyote would get lost in. If a coyote ventured beyond the first jagged sierra all he would have to do to get a meal was to find a prospector.

No need for the coyote or lobo to get excited during the hunt. Just trail him and he would lie down and die sooner or later. The problem was how was the scavenger to get out of the desert?

Three desert wolves and seven coyotes went down there once in a band. They were following a handful of unfortunate travelers—human beings, who, according to the general rule of Soda Mesa Desert were doomed to lie down and die before a given number of days had elapsed.

But this band of loboos and coyotes had already learned by experience that to go far into the desert meant trouble for themselves as well as for the human beings. Particularly at this season of which I write, when the water-holes were all turned to bowls of salt.

When I say loboes and coyotes, I speak figuratively. I do not actually mean desert wolves. The band I speak of is a band of renegades. The three loboes are three white men of more or less mixed breed; the seven coyotes are seven Indians.

I had something of an aversion to calling these incarnations of ferocity and cowardice human beings. But such they were, although it disgraces my race to say so. The orneriest, hell-diving mustang ever roped has something more of nobility about him than these renegades.

And they were not entirely unusual in Soda Mesa Desert. You mix white and Papago blood and you have a measly and dirty sort of fellow. Mix a white man with an Apache and you have one that is measly, dirty and also insolent.

One of these breeds was delegated by his companions to circle around the band of unfortunate travelers who had just come from Mule Town and then ride toward them as if he were a lone wanderer from the desert. They chose for this mission a gnarled old man with high cheekbones, skin like brown paper that has been crumpled, and long dry fingers like strands of unwound cordage with knots in them for knuckles.

As he was bidden, he hid his pinto in a certain arroyo, then leading a burro packed with a few cans, kyacks, pick ax and a pan, he approached the travelers who had come into his domain.

The little caravan, he noticed, had encamped in the shade of a few boulders and yuccas. A fire

of mesquite roots was sending up a thick pungent smoke into the still air. A poetical looking Mexican with cow's eyes and a downy mustache was cooking. Another was unsaddling horses and mules. A very old bent woman was rummaging for cans in the floor of a prairie schooner.

A tall man with black sombrero, and silvery hair that fell to his shoulders, appeared to be the chief of the outfit. He was smoking a corncob and looking philosophically at the glaring red of the surrounding mesas. A fat, apoplectic woman was already gorging herself with the first strips of bacon from the poetical cook's pan. A small red-headed boy, with something of worship in his fox-eyes, was watching a gaunt, brown-haired youth. This latter was plunking at a banjo and singing:

"Oh, Canteen Nell was a jolly old soul,
A jolly old soul was she!
And when she danced, she toted a gun,
Which same was intended for me!"

The tall, silvery haired man with the eagle eyes, studying the red and yellow strata of surrounding cliffs, was not the first to notice the sudden approach of a stranger through the thick chaparral. He had no idea that any human being—other than his companions—was in that desert cañon.

The man who first saw the little stranger with the high cheekbones and the rope-like fingers, was no other than the youth playing with happy abandon at the banjo.

"And when she danced she toted a gun,
Which same was intended for me!
But hell for leather was lots of fun—"

The banjo—and the singing voice stopped.
The performer called out:

"Holloa there, hombre! I saw you when you were coming down through the divide! Get away from the hostile side of that jack, sling your holster over it, and have a drink of water."

A second look at this old wanderer convinced everybody in the party that he was not exactly the man you would want to drink with. And furthermore, Plunk Reverdy had had a very disagreeable experience with just such a character, not so very long ago.

But the first law of the desert was bred deep in Plunk's blood and bone. A stranger must have half your food and your water—if he is in need.

"But there is plenty of water, *señor*," the shriveled gnome said, "just yonder across the divide."

"Well I'm glad to know it," said Plunk. "You've already done us a good turn telling us that. So fall to if you're hungry."

"I am hungry, *señor*. You are my pard—and master, from this day on."

"I might be your pard and master while you're eating," said Plunk. "But from then on I don't expect to ever see you again. So get to your feed, then vamo." "

The rest of the party were very much of Plunk's opinion—except in the one detail of letting him have anything to eat at all.

The cook's bovine eyes seemed to take on something of human malice. He kept the bowie knife, with which he had been slicing the bacon, menacingly ready. The wrangler herded his horses together as if on the slightest provocation this desert wolf would make off with one. Which was if not a just supposition, most certainly a true one.

Old Jackson Brower watched the stranger from under beetling white brows. No one should eat while such a tramp was eating. A ridiculous procedure—inviting him to stop! Just like a sentimental banjo-player. Besides whose food was it anyway?

"Outrageous!" said the damp, melted fat lady. "The idea of holding up our supper for that old wretch!"

The "wretch" said nothing while he ate. He watched every one—something after the manner of a dog with a bone, looking up under tangled eyebrows, as if ready to growl if any one approached too close.

There was complete silence while he ate. When I say silence I except the sloughing and munching and slobbering of the tramp's mastication. Every one watched with apparent disgust; the old woman with fear. The red-headed boy stood legs akimbo, his big mouth widened in a grin that showed the sockets of the lost eye-teeth.

Jackson Brower watched fiercely, like an eagle waiting for the remnants of a feast; the plump

damp woman, who was the hungriest, fumed and sweated. The cook stood by with his knife. Plunk Reverdy took his banjo and was about to play—but he found he could not.

He remembered having served music with meals once before!

When the guest finished, he wiped his mouth with his dry, ropy hand, and said:

“I’m thankin’ you-all. I won’t forgit. Won’t offer you nothin’ bein’ you’re gents and ladies and wouldn’t take same. But I kin at least show my thanks by offerin’ this here Mex cook a tip.”

He gave the cook the “tip” bowing to him with mock obsequiousness. The cook looked at him fearfully, the whites of his bovine eyes showing like a cow that hears the whirr of the lariat.

The tip was a rawhide bag which on examination proved to contain a bit of gold dust in the seams. Cleaning it out carefully would give enough for a haircut, drink and tamale in Horner’s cantina back at Mule Town.

By the time the cook had counted his money, so to speak, the departing guest was on the trail.

The whole crowd watched him; for he had an air. Furthermore two days had elapsed since they had seen a human soul other than themselves. And each one, by now, was getting heartily sick of everybody else.

“Oh, Canteen Nell was a jolly old soul.
A jolly old soul was she!”

“You don’t seem to have learned yet, Mr.

Banjo-player, that I'm not musical in my nature," old Jackson Brower said, with a venomous glance at Plunk.

"I thought you said you brought him along so's we could have music around the campfire?" the red-headed boy objected.

"So I did!" the old man growled. "But the air's gettin' too hot and stuffy to have it vibratin' with banjo chords."

"Maw said the banjo-player come along for to protect us agin Injuns," shouted the red-headed boy, turning his fox-eyes adoringly to Plunk.

Plunk realized that this was heading straight for a fight. And old Brower would have fought—there's no doubt about that. He would have rolled up his sleeves, brushed his silvery hair away from his eyes, and lit in like a hot-headed school-boy. And he was about to do it if you could judge by the flaming face.

"I think I'll eat," said Plunk, putting his banjo away.

He ate, and as he ate he watched the dwindling form of the desert tramp going up there on the zigzag trail to the cañon rim, followed by his pack burro.

When Plunk was through with his meal, he rolled a cigarette, lay in the sand and felt comfortable; so comfortable that he was in danger of bursting out in song. But there was Jackson Brower peering at him maliciously from under the black rim of his sombrero.

Instead of playing, Plunk looked up in the direction which their "guest" had taken. The desert renegade was just now climbing to the rim. A moment later he had disappeared over the divide.

His visit had left a bad taste in Plunk's mouth. It reminded him of that extremely disagreeable adventure with the outlaw Tarante.

In fact, the gnarled old tramp had had a gleam in his red eyes very much like Tarante's. Plunk could not get those eyes out of his mind. Nor could he get the eyes of the Mexican cook out of his mind. He evoked the picture of them widening until the muddy whites showed at that moment when the tramp had given him the "tip".

This cook with the poetical face and cow's eyes came over to Plunk right now.

"I had to wait," he pleaded. "He said I would be kill'. *Por Dios*, in fear of death I must wait till he was out of your reach. Then he said I must give you thees."

To the amazement of Plunk and all the rest of the outfit, the Mex handed him a note.

"*He* gave you this!" Plunk repeated. "Why didn't you read it?"

"Please, *señor*, I don' can read."

"And why did you say you didn't give it to me right off the bat?"

"That hombre said I would be kill'. He whisper to me while you all stood to watch. What terrible crime have I commit', *señor*, when I am threaten' with death itself—"

But Plunk Reverdy was reading the note.

We havent nothin agin you Reverdy.

He read that first sentence partly aloud. But then he went on rapidly to himself:

We dont like your shootin-iron, which same we respect. but you get outen the way, if you mozey off a ways and stay off, we wont touch you. but them others in yore outfit we intend to raid. if you stay might youll shoot down three or four of us. but we got plenty of men to spare. if you beat it and leave them to us, why theyll be less blood shed and the raid will be pulled off gentlemenlike.

Reverdy's face was white. It was the pallor that comes of a terrific shock. His feelings must have been, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the feelings of fear for the safety of his protégés—and then of a consuming rage.

Whoever these renegades were, they were certainly yellow-livered skunks to think they could put up a proposition like that to any man! Trying to dicker with the one dangerous member of the outfit, so that they could fall upon their prey without a fight! It was such a dastardly trick that Plunk's first insane desire was to take a bowie knife, find them, and rip their yellow vitals out.

He crumpled the paper in his fist as if he were squeezing the life out of a man's throat.

"What's the note say?" old Brower demanded.

"Never mind what it says!" Reverdy cried, his lips trembling in his rage. He tore it up, throwing the pieces wide into the mesquite.

Next he jumped for his horse. Not the pinto

he had been riding, but his own gentle riding gift-horse which he had loaned to the red-headed kid. He wanted a horse that could cover that zigzag trail up to the cañon rim where that nasty little gnome had disappeared. He would be the first one to kill. And most surely a horse could overtake a man and a burro.

"Where you goin'?" Old Brower asked.

"I'm going to plug that coyote," said Reverdy. "And as for you all—you're going straight home. So pack up. But don't hit the trail till I come back. Stay right here in the cañon bed so I can keep you in sight!"

"Who are you to order us back, Mr. Banjo-player!" Brower roared.

But Reverdy was galloping off.

The Mex wrangler was close herding his horses near the covered wagon; the Mex cook was crossing himself and praying to many saints.

Old Brower was scratching his silvery hair and swearing.

The red-headed kid was jumping about excitedly, gleefully, yelling questions at the top of his lungs:

"What-all's happened, maw? Why's he ridin' off that-away? What was in that note? Why was he so white? Why was his lips a-tremblin'? What are the Mexes' knees shakin' that-away for?"

His mother, fat and puffing, her crimson face streaming, had gotten to her hands and knees in

the sand and was searching about diligently for something in the mesquite patch.

"Shut up and help me find these pieces of paper," she ordered. "And we'll find out the answer!"

CHAPTER IX

THE DEAD TARANTE SPEAKS

NOW if we analyzed Plunk Reverdy's act, which was the act of a moment, we could build up enough propositions and paragraphs to cover several hours of discussion or reading. The main thing to remember is that he followed his first impulse—which overcame him on the spur of the moment—the impulse to chase that little coyote and punish him for daring to make such a cowardly offer.

You must not forget that Reverdy had a very sensitive pride. He took that note as a personal insult. Those renegades had made a proposition which showed that they thought he might conceivably be a coward himself. It was enough! He went hell-bent to show them how much of a coward he was!

Of course he was not fool enough to think that he would let his protégés out of his sight. That under the circumstances would be criminal negligence. He had come now to regard them as a hen regards her chickens. Plunk would go off for a little distance for a worm, perhaps, but he would not let his helpless little chickens out of his sight.

An older and more cautious man might have ordered his outfit to intrench, while he went scouting up to the cañon rim in the hopes of finding some trace of the enemy. That would have been wise. No use in ordering them to flee home without some idea of the enemy's position. They might bump right into an ambush.

Then again, a very old and very cautious man might have ordered them to intrench and have remained with them. But this would have invited disaster. To wait there with a limited supply of water until you were attacked was ridiculous. Plunk Reverdy had heard somewhere of that military axiom which stipulates that in an engagement with a larger force the right move is to make the attack yourself.

Thus in analysis Plunk did what was right, although he did it not after any analysis whatsoever, but in a moment of blind rage. He went after that sniveling coyote, with a reasonable guess that the enemy was in that direction.

Their emissary, the twisted little tramp, would most probably go back to them for protection, inasmuch as he had no ostensible means of escape aside from his own feet and a pack burro.

As Plunk was chasing him, he felt that he was going to meet the enemy alone—and have it out.

Furthermore, as I have said, he kept an eye on his outfit down there in the cañon bed, and comforted himself with the feeling that those boulders, which had served them as shade, offered

the protection of intrenchments—yes, of a fort.

But now as he urged his horse to the very limit of the old beast's strength to the rim of the cañon, Plunk began to think more and more. His own hurt pride at being approached by cowards was of less and less importance. The safety of the outfit—for which he was responsible to the sheriff, to civilization, to God, and to that girl—became of terrific and vital moment.

He looked back again. There they were. And the cañon was a scene of sun-baked peace. The floor was simmering; the stretches of sand were like white-hot iron. Beyond were imitation lakes of blue water which the fierce glow of the afternoon had evoked. To one side was an arroyo, well choked with cactus, mesquite and other chaparral which the few hours of sun which entered that narrow defile could not destroy.

Reverdy had just estimated that a lot of men could hide in that arroyo with their horses, when he saw the man he was chasing.

The little old bandit had just crossed a slight depression beyond the rim of the cañon, had come up on the other side, and was now riding a horse. He had tricked Plunk pretty well in making the latter think that he had no means of escape aside from that jackass.

It would take scarcely two minutes to urge his horse down that depression and up the other side. In that two minutes Plunk would lose sight of his outfit. But what's two minutes? What's two

minutes when you're hell-bent on killing a man?

Plunk dove down, with the one thought in his mind of plugging that measly little tick. When you're going to kill a man, I imagine, it is hard to think two or three different things at the same time. Anyhow, there he went.

Down the adobe banks he rode tearing through thorn bushes until his shirt was ripped and his horse was scratched cruelly. Now that horse was in some respects like the most famous pack animal in all history. I mean Balaam's ass. Balaam's ass, it will be remembered, turned around to his rider and made a remark to the effect that he was being urged to do something that was not possible for any pack animal to do.

Similarly this gift horse turned his white-specked, lugubrious face about and looked at Plunk out of the corner of his eyes. Plunk never forgot it, although at that moment it gave him no pause whatsoever. He dug his heels into the old critter's flanks, urged him through the cactus and up the other bank.

He reached it in time to see his victim galloping off in a cloud of alkali, across the flat top of the mesa rim. He didn't seem to be of any mind to turn around and look behind him either. He went tearing off, low crouched, without so much as trying to fire at his enemy. Probably he thought that he was well out of range. But he was not.

Reverdy fired. And the shot went home. In what part of the bandit it lodged there was no

telling. Suffice it to say the renegade rolled from his saddle into a patch of purple sage. He lay there convulsed, arching up like a snake that has been crushed amidships, and then fell down flat again.

A lot of things happened in the next few moments.

The whole episode of that renegade getting almost out of reach and then falling reminded Plunk of the shooting of the bandit Tarante. And that horse Plunk was riding, turning around and looking out of the corner of his big brown eyes with the most human look of accusation Plunk had ever seen, reminded him of the bandit Tarante likewise. Perhaps this was because Tarante was the giver of the horse.

And then Plunk thought of the strange prophecy of Augustina, the palmist. It all came at once—all these visions arising at the same instant like two photographs mixed up on one film. Plunk visualized the seamed, canny face of Augustina as he had seen it a few nights ago at the Rex Cantina.

Why he thought of her now he never knew. But he saw her speaking to him, as distinctly as if she were face to face: "Tarante is dead! Yes, of course! But, *por Dios*, what difference can that make?"

Yes, Tarante, the bandit he had killed, was going to get his revenge. How, no one in the world could have guessed. But Plunk knew it

was coming. Perhaps it was just the fraction of a second before it came; but he knew it.

The horse made a peculiar, stumbling movement. It was like a ship dipping into a storm before you can either see the swell of the sea or feel the wind.

I have tried to describe how the depression in the cañon rim, which Plunk had just crossed, prevented him for the space of two minutes from keeping his eye on his outfit—his helpless chickens down there in the cañon bed.

Of course he looked back the instant after he had plugged the fugitive renegade. Now as he looked back he saw one of them—the fat woman—waving a red Navaho blanket.

She was waving to him.

He scowled, pulling his sombrero brim down so as to shade his eyes. Yes, she was waving frantically. And so was the little red-headed boy. And the old Kentucky woman was waving with empty hands as if she were a jointed wooden figure being pulled rapidly by a string. One of the Mexicans was crawling under the covered wagon; another was sneaking off to a horse.

Old Brower, the most conspicuous figure because of his black sombrero—although he seemed no larger than a black ant—was leading the cavy of horses and mules to the protection of a row of giant boulders.

Reverdy waved back to them.

Then a shot rang out. Plunk saw far down there, in what looked like a dead flat patch of sage, a series of twinkling lights, followed by sharp pistol shots, like a man away off on the other side of the cañon cracking a horsewhip.

The whole scene had come as such an overwhelming tragedy that Plunk's heart fairly stopped beating. Then he gave a quick yank at his mount's head, turning it sharply about so as to wheel the horse and dive again into that depression through which he had just come.

The horse tensed up to throw back. Aside from that first little stumbling lurch, which I have described as the uncertain dip of a ship's prow into a coming storm, Plunk had no idea in the world what was about to happen.

And he couldn't believe what happened either. Nor did any one else that he ever told.

In a word, that gift horse of Tarante's turned in the blink of an eye from a gentle old stock-horse into a catamount, into a man-killing puma, into a demon. He started in on a series of corkscrewing bucks, the first of which loosened Plunk from his seat, and the last of which nearly loosened his head from his body.

Plunk had no doubt in his mind now what had happened. In fact, he thought he had figured it out fairly quick. But when he tightened his knees in an attempt to regain his seat he didn't find anything to tighten them against. He was on the sand instead of on the horse's back, and above him was

a demon rearing up against the sun, poising to land on his victim's chest with his forefeet.

Plunk rolled. The revolver which he had clung to tenaciously all this time was knocked out of his arm with a sledgehammer blow. The sledgehammer was the flint-like, desert-hardened hoof of the horse. The victim did not stop rolling; he went on down the sand bank, through the cactus, over a ridge, into a ditch, while that brute up there on the edge of the bank looked down at him, teeth bared, eyes flashing red, more like the eyes of a madman than of a horse.

But Reverdy landed comfortably against a boulder, which erased all the details of that hideous picture—the tossing mane, the bared yellow teeth, the rolling eyes, the snorting nostrils, the murderous hoofs.

CHAPTER X

MRS. PIKEY'S VERSION

THE sun beat down upon him in that oven of sand bowlders and sojuaro. It was the first sensation he had upon regaining consciousness—the sensation of being slowly baked alive.

His head was so light that it minimized the pain in his arm and the throbbing pain of his skull. For a while he seemed to be floating up there in dazzling white clouds which slowly turned to burning sand. The pronged sojuaro loomed all about him, jet black against a million points of vibrating flame.

He struggled to his hands and knees—a gesture that brought more points of light—long shafts of them, darting in and out and across his vision.

It all came back to him. A demon clothed in the blood bay hide of a horse, had turned upon him, made an attempt to rend him to pieces with its yellow teeth, forestruck at him, trampled him. By a merciful act of Providence part of the sand bank had given away, and he had slid.

The termination of that slide was only a conjecture on his part. His head ached as if a bowlder had rolled over it. And there was a bowlder at his elbow. He was helping himself up by it.

He was sitting on it. Yes—a very merciful act of Providence had saved him—for the demon in horsehide was gone.

And yet, just how merciful had Providence been? How much more merciful if Providence had only let that horse finish his victim! And that was Plunk Reverdy's view of the matter the next instant.

For it was then that he thought of the band of defenseless souls entrusted to his care.

He crawled up to the edge of the gulch and looked far down into the cañon floor.

There was no more noise, no more distant crackling of revolver shots. The cañon lay silent, swathed in blue stretches of mirage lakes. Somewhat on his own level a buzzard was wheeling. Rather low for a buzzard—unless it had a definite line on carrion.

Plunk, of course, looked for the covered wagon—the most conspicuous detail of his little caravan. But it wasn't there. There was a fire—not the campfire, but a smoldering mess of black embers where the covered wagon had been. Two mules lay near by—not as mules might lie, but as carcasses will lie, without shape.

All the people he could see, were lying in the same way: all except one formless thing like a rag doll leaning against a boulder.

As Plunk went lurching dizzily, frantically down the steep trail—cutting off the switch-backs by dropping in great leaps over adobe banks, rock

ledges, and into dry stream beds—he kept looking at those bodies lying there, the residue of that murderous raid.

He found out as he approached that the sun winked sharply on the bared head of one. It was old Jackson Brower.

The rag doll, thrown against the boulder—well, that must have been Brower's eighty-year-old aunt.

At her very feet was a misshapen bundle of clothes and a Mexican sombrero laying where it had rolled a yard away. The cook, perhaps. Or else the wrangler.

One of the other Mexicans was lying virtually in the embers of the smoldering wagon. He must have been the one who had crawled under the prairie schooner to hide when the raid began. He had not crawled very far away from the burning wagon before he was put out of the fight—out of all fights.

Eagerly as Plunk ran, he looked about for a sign of the other two members of his little band—the fat woman and her red-headed kid.

There was not a sign of them anywhere about the pyre, or in the boulder wash round about, or in the mesquite patches.

There was no telling what had happened to them. Their possible fate made Reverdy plunge along all the faster.

And as he plunged along, his eager eyes straining upon that scene of devastation, the sunlight on

old Brower's silvery hair seemed to twinkle. The bright spot of light moved.

The old man at least, out of all that ill-fated group, was not yet dead.

Reverdy, crashing through the mesquite thorn, gave voice to a prayer of thanks for this meager bit of mercy.

But what had happened to the poor little red-headed boy, who had so idolized Plunk Reverdy? And what had happened to his mother, Mrs. Pikey?

In order to clearly set forth the events of this chronicle it will be best to record the adventures—as briefly as possible—of those two people, the mother and her boy. Plunk Reverdy was unable to find out for a good long time just what happened to them. In fact, the inhabitants of Mule Town heard the news of their escape from the raid before Reverdy himself.

It happened in this wise:

Mule Town had settled down to its ordinary routine of existence. It expected that two weeks would elapse before any news would come concerning the expedition that had set out under Plunk Reverdy's care. The townsfolk turned to themselves for the regular dispensation of excitement—the cantinas and the gaming halls.

And during the daytime even this excitement was denied them. Gamblers slept; herders returned to their ranches; the miners returned to

the United Jack up at Puma Mesa. Barkeeps swept their floors and sprinkled sawdust. Mexican women sat on the ground pounding meal on flat rocks for their enchiladas.

And Nell Brower made periodic trips to the Indian village at Eagle Feather Cañon to teach school, tend the sick, and carry on what missionary work the grouchy, superstitious old chief would permit.

I imagine she had more excitement up there at Thunder Bird Mesa than you could find—during the day—at Mule Town.

But on the day that an old prospector brought fat Mrs. Pikey into town from the desert with her red-headed boy, a drama unfolded itself in Mule Town with a bigger punch in it than any Indian raid, or Mex revolution or barroom brawl ever pulled off for miles around.

Mrs. Pikey was considerably thinner than when last seen.

Her red-headed boy had grown up over night and didn't ask questions any more. He was in a position now to answer them. He was scarred with thorn and splintered rocks. His face was bruised. His two missing front teeth looked as if they had been knocked out by a tomahawk. His feet, from which his shoes had been worn away, were bound with leather thongs stripped from a pack-saddle.

His mother's feet were in the same dilapidated state, and hung down on each side of the burro

she was riding, as shapeless and helpless as if the lady had dropsy in both legs. She had to be carried in the arms of a barkeep and a stable boy into the vestibule of the Rex Hotel.

Once dropped into a chair, she gave two orders and then went into hysterics: The first order was for food. The second for the sheriff.

The red-headed boy forgot the pain in his feet about which he had been whining and yowling for four consecutive days. He now began to walk. No use being sick when there was so much fortune, or rather fame, to be had for the mere asking. Wink Pikey, in fact, had become a personage and a hero. And there was no need in telling him so.

"Injuns!" he announced to the vestibule which was now crowded with all the inhabitants of Mule Town that had witnessed that extraordinary entry: the barkeeps, the veterinary, the stable mozos, the harness maker, the chowcart Jap, the Chinese cook from the Rex Hotel and Jonlee's Cantina, the *señoras* who had been pounding maize.

Yes, the vestibule was so jammed in the space of ten minutes that Sheriff Hornuff and two or three of his men had to edge their way in by force.

"Injuns!" said Wink Pikey, in the center of the stage. Only the ring around him could see him. The rest heard his piping little voice: "And I bumped off a couple, I'll tell you! So help me! With this here six-gun. See it?"

"Shut up you little liar!" Mrs. Pikey cried. "All you bumped off was one of our own mules."

Sheriff Hornuff's voice broke in from the crowded door:

"What's this I hear about Mrs. Pikey and her kid bein' toted into town."

"They was toted in by old Bash Carson, the prospector, chief. Ridin' his burros. Just came. They was raided in the desert."

"Leave the sheriff get in thar, gents!" said some one. The crowd eased away.

The little boy was brandishing his six-gun to an open-mouthed audience. "*Me* kill a mule!" he snorted. "It was the Injuns killed him—they killed two of 'em. I shot this here iron six times, so help me! What does my maw know about it! She was howlin' and screechin' and yankin' me about somethin' awful! If she hadn't took this here iron from me, I'd of got three more of 'em!"

Mrs. Pikey did not interrupt this speech because she was busy emptying a full dipper of cold water. When she was through it was the signal for Wink Pikey to end his own oration. He drank only half a dipper, for the other half spilled over his torn shirt and pants, as he immersed himself up to his ears.

At this juncture, the prospector—who had brought the two fugitives in from the desert—had a chance to get in a word or two.

"Found 'em about twenty miles this side of Sody Mesa," he said. "The ole lady—she was nigh to croakin' what with thirst and hunger. The

kid yonder weren't his right self either, as I found out later. Couldn't git him to talk or make a sound—or even whine.

"Soon as I give him some water he started in cryin' and kep' it up ever since. 'My feet's achin', maw! Will the Injuns git after us agin, maw? My head's achin', maw! Do you reckon the Injuns is chasin' us, maw?' That's all I heard for two dad-burned miserable days! And the ole lady," he said under his breath, "she was wus-ern the kid!"

"But what's happened to old Jackson Brower—and his aunt?" the sheriff interrupted. "All I kin make out the party was attacked by Indians! If so, where's the rest of the outfit at?"

"All killed!" said the prospector, "leastwise that's my understandin'. Leave *her* tell you. Only watch out for her hysterics when she gits started tellin'."

Mrs. Pikey was now drinking coffee. She was too exhausted to go into the dining room for the meal she had ordered. But she was doing her best to brace herself up for the occasion.

Her boy was dipping his face into another tinful of water.

The old prospector was soothing his alkali parched throat with jackass brandy.

Finally, out of the score of questions fired at her, Mrs. Pikey picked out the sheriff. His presence calmed her. They were saved!

"Jackson Brower? What's happened to him?"

she repeated. "Mr. Sheriff, I don't know."

"You don't know. Well, is he still alive?"

"I don't know that either. The last I saw him, he had been hit by one of the raiders. In the arm it was. A young man might have stood it. But he's old."

"And you don't know that he's dead?"

"I don't know nothin'!" she snapped.

"Well, look here, Mrs. Pikey, you better talk quick and think clear. I've got to get up a posse and horse down there—huntin' for 'em."

"Huntin' for who?" Mrs. Pikey asked dramatically. "They's no one left so far as I know. Except perhaps the ole aunt. The renegades didn't fire at us—I saw that when the shootin' started. The ole woman stood right up—like a crazy ninny, and asked what all the shootin' was for! And they went right on, firing from every side of us, from behind bowlders, from the mesquite, from the stream bed and such. Bullets was whizzin' everywhere."

"One went through me hat, so help me!" cried Wink Pikey at the top of his lungs.

His mother boxed his ears and went on softly:

"When I seen they wasn't pottin' at the womenfolk, I made up my mind I'd make a break for the mesquite—and save this here kid. Though he ain't worth it!"

"If they wasn't pottin' at the womenfolk, you'd orter been more scairt than ever!" said one of the farmers' wives.

"Scairt? I wasn't scairt. Funny how you don't get scairt once the fightin' starts. It's before it starts that you git scairt —"

"You was howlin' bloody murder —" the red-headed son objected.

"Oh, yes, I was scairt because of you—you little seedwart!" Mrs. Pikey admitted. In this she must have told the truth. "I tell you—all of you, when the firin' was on none of us was scairt. Even the Mexes started firin' back. Although one of 'em crawled under the wagon—and was like to git burned alive after he was wounded and they set fire to it. The other Mex was killed outright.

"Old Brower—he warden't daid. Nor was his aunt. She just sat through it, mumblin' and askin' what the shootin' was for. And two of the mules, they was plugged. I seen that from the rim of the cañon—"

"What cañon—" the sheriff asked.

"Where we was camped. It's on the south slope of the sierra. Don't know its name. They surrounded our camp when we was in a bowlder wash down below. Then when the shootin' was fiercest and I figured all was killed but the ole aunt, why I took my kid and ran for the mesquite. One of 'em stopped us —"

"It was an Injun chief!" commented Wink Pikey. "They was thousands of 'em."

"It warden't an Injun chief. It was a white tramp with one eye," said the mother. "He

stopped us, searched us both, then kicked Wink here into the brush, and told me to vamose as quick and as far as my legs would carry me. I didn't stop to palaver. All I seen was that they had rushed the camp—"

"Millions of 'em!" said Wink. "Shoutin' and whoopin'."

"They waren't millions, and they waren't shoutin'. They went about it as quiet as any bunch I ever did see. Only I was a good half mile off by the time they burned the wagon. I seen 'em searching all the duffel bags, takin' all the water and such, shoulder holsters of the Mexes, their six-guns, and friskin' poor ole Brower who wasn't daid yet so far as I could see.

"They took a long time about it—and I and this whinin' nuisance here was well up the side of the cañon. The last I see of 'em they was roundin' up the hosses. Like as not they rustled 'em all. But I didn't see any more. When we got to the cañon rim we started to run straight acrost the mesa top and we didn't stop till we dropped in our tracks either!"

Old Sheriff Hornuff was scratching his head. "They's somethin' about this here narrative which I don't quite savvy."

"Leave me tell you!" Wink Pikey cried. "If maw had let me stay, I'd of gotten a dozen of 'em! But it waren't no use. They kept comin'—bands of whoopin' Injuns—ridin' in circles around us! With bows and arrows! Must of

been three or four tribes of 'em—all on the war-path! ”

Another fusillade of questions was about to explode. This time the sheriff, however, was mute. He still scratched his head. There was a mystery that had to be cleared up before he could start out with his posse to rescue old Brower and the aunt from Kentucky.

One of the cantina girls had a chance to murmur worshipfully as Mrs. Pikey was munching hungrily at a hot dog.

“You say, Mrs. Pikey—you *wasn't* afraid!”

“Afraid! No!” Mrs. Pikey affirmed with desperate assurance and a mouth full of sausage and bread. “You ain’t afraid at a time like that! Except a mother’s afraid for her kid! I’m tellin’ you—all the honest-to-God truth. It was the funniest thing about it all. I wasn’t afraid—except when we was climbin’ the side of that cañon. Not even the Mexes was afraid I tell you! We were all as calm as cucumbers—exceptin’ one.”

Now she swallowed her mouthful, and prepared for the climax up to which she had been unconsciously leading. “*One of the outfit was yaller!*”

“You ain’t mentioned him as yet,” said the sheriff. He stopped scratching his head. He held his breath. Every one realized now that in her rapid, incoherent description of the raid, Mrs. Pikey had left out any mention of the man who should have been the leading character:

"Yes, Plunk Reverdy—what in tarnation was he doin' all this time?" several asked. "We'd admire to know that."

"Plunk Reverdy—he was the man who showed yaller!" the lady announced.

This was received at first in a shocked silence. Then came incredulous gasps.

"How do you mean—yaller!" asked the bar-keep belligerently.

"Yaller—Plunk Reverdy? Oh, no! that ain't right. Cain't sagebrush us that-away!" said the veterinary.

Mrs. Pikey began to storm. "Oh, I figured no one would believe it! But when the facts is out—"

"What did Plunk do—tell us that—afore we pass judgment on him."

"He cleared out before the shootin' began!" snapped Mrs. Pikey.

"Oh, no! Not Plunk! Somethin's phony about this whole yarn," said the proprietor of the Rex Hotel.

A broad smile came over Sheriff Hornuff's wrinkled face. "Gents," he said, "I reckon there ain't no cause for us to ride to-day." He elbowed his way out, and his henchmen followed him. He got to the sidewalk, his grin having blossomed to a chuckle. "I've seen many folks come back from the Sody Mesa Desert plumb out 'n their heads—and spinnin' yarns," he said. "But that thar woman—" he pointed his thumb over his convulsive

shoulder—"she's shore as bad as any ole cow, locoed with heel flies!"

"When the kid said they was millions of Injuns," said one of his deputies, "I figured we was kind of bein' cross-fissured. The ole lady like as not got separated somehow from the outfit and took the wrong trail."

"That's more like it!" several agreed.

"I kin swallow the kid's yarn about the Indians," said Sheriff Hornuff. "But the ole woman spillin' that thar speech about Plunk Reverdy—wow!"

It was thus that Hornuff and his men went off in a gale of laughter.

CHAPTER XI

THE DAMNING EVIDENCE

NEEDESS to say, however, the sheriff had to investigate. He had sent out an outfit into Soda Mesa Desert — always a dangerous procedure; and he had placed a young deputy in command of it — a man of more or less carefree disposition, banjo-playing proclivities, and youthful hot-headedness. Yet he was a boy of unquestioned courage. Sheriff Hornuff had slept peacefully after putting that outfit under the personal supervision of such a protector.

But something of course had happened. It was of paramount and immediate importance to get to the bottom of it.

The first thing Hornuff did was to send a rider to Eagle Feather Cañon where Jackson Brower's granddaughter was engaged on that particular day in administering to a sick Navaho girl, whom their witch doctor had failed to cure.

The sheriff's next duty was to request a personal interview with Mrs. Pikey. Now that she had eaten enough to save three starving prospectors from death, her testimony would perhaps be less erratic in nature.

He found her in her room in the upper story

of the Rex Hotel, a palm leaf fan in one hand, an enchilada rolled in husks, in the other. On the warped wash stand—which together with a cot and two chairs furnished the room—was a bottle of soda pop. She drank from this to wash down the enchilada; she was still powerfully dry.

Wink Pikey was on the cot sound asleep.

“Have you sent out the posse yet, chief?” Mrs. Pikey asked when her caller entered.

He coughed embarrassedly, then hedged with: “They’re saddlin’ up—and cleanin’ their guns.”

The word guns must have reached Wink Pikey’s subconscious mind, for he awoke, and cried out with a start: “Are the Injuns comin’ agin, maw?”

Old Hornuff noticed this, and bit his mustache thoughtfully. He must get at the truth—and quickly. A tragedy of some sort had happened.

“I wanted to ask you confidential-like, ma’am,” he began, “just what did happen down thar in the desert.”

“Haven’t I told you?” Mrs. Pikey wailed. “Do I have to go all over that frightful business again.”

“No, not exactly, ma’am. All as I wanted to do is to git the facts clear, afore I go horsin’ out on a wild goose chase with a lot of deputies.”

“Shall I state the facts over agin?” Mrs. Pikey said sarcastically.

“Oh, no! I’ve heard your version of that there ‘raid.’ But there seems to be what I calls a discrepancy.”

"A what—"

"That little point you mentioned concernin' Plunk Reverdy."

"Don't mention that coyote's name to me!" she stormed. "You'll have the same opinion of him as I have when you know the truth. Sounds fishy, does it? The famous fightin', banjo-playin' Plunk. Oh, yes, that's a good joke; we'll call him a banjo-player all right enough—but fighter—pouf!"

"Just where was he at, when this fightin' was goin' on?"

"He'd snuck out—rode up to the rim of the cañon, pretendin' he was chasin' a measly old Mexican rat that couldn't have harmed a heifer! Went horsin' up the trail—as fast as his mount could gallop—didn't matter where so long as he got a good heap of trail between us and him."

Sheriff Hornuff frowned. "Did he leave you out'n his sight?"

"No—he didn't—"

"Well, that's good." The frown was erased momentarily. "Didn't think Plunk would leave you get out'n his sight. That I could count on."

"Oh, you didn't, eh? Well, he got out'n our sight quick enough when the raid started! We waved to him—with blankets and such, when he was high up there on the cañon rim. We waved because we seen the raiders comin' down out of the arroyo, and crawlin' through the mesquite and surroundin' us."

"I figure they waited till Plunk got away from you," the sheriff said thoughtfully. "That is, if they knew who he was. If they knew they'd of been scairt to tackle you with him on deck."

"That's just it. They were scairt! And they waited for their chanst. The chanst he give 'em. *The chanst they asked him to give 'em.*"

"Now what the Sam Hill are you feedin' me, ma'am!"

"Just what I say. He left—because they asked him to."

"Oh, no. That ain't true. You cain't get me—or any other man, to believe that."

"Oh, I cain't?" she snapped. "Listen to this, Mr. Sheriff. We waved—and he saw us. Because he waved back! Then the raiders began to shoot—"

"And what did he do then?"

"Disappeared—that's what. Like as not, he hid in the brush. We all watched for him, peeling our eyes all durin' that fight. And nary another sight did we get of him!"

The sheriff was biting his mustache. Finally, he said: "Still and all—"

"Still and all—he turned yaller—and left us to our fate! That's the still and all of it, Mr. Sheriff!"

"They's no reason to think he knew they was comin'."

"Oh, so *that's* what's stickin' you, is it?" Mrs. Pikey laughed. She reached into her bosom for

a precious bundle of tiny bits of paper. It was the most precious thing in that whole raided outfit—the one thing that had been saved.

“I was goin’ to show it to the gang downstairs,” she said, “after I’d pieced it all together. But bein’ you’re so sot on callin’ Plunk Reverdy a brave man, when he’s a dyed-in-the-wool coward, I’ll just settle the question now.”

Sheriff Hornuff watched her take the bits of paper from the single hair-pin upon which they had been skewered, and arrange them on the wash-stand.

It didn’t take her long. She had done the job before. She had done it as soon as the bits had been gathered from the mesquite where Plunk Reverdy in his rage and carelessness had thrown them. Everybody in the outfit had read the contents of that note. She could have recited it to Sheriff Hornuff without showing him the writing. But the actual scrip was worth more. It was dramatic. It was damning. Mrs. Pikey delighted in doing damning and dramatic things.

Sheriff Hornuff squinted his eyes, took the gray mustache out of the corner of his mouth where he had been chewing it, and started instead to pull it, making one side of the wrinkled face smooth. He read as if he had a tobacco cud there.

His thick brows contracted as he came to the end of the note, and he finished by reading out loud:

“If you beat it and leave them to us, why

they'll be less blood shed, and the raid will be pulled off gentlemen-like."

He read this last sentence over two or three times. His voice was high, incredulous; he almost sang the words. A curious thing for old Sheriff Hornuff. He went back to the beginning of the note:

"We haven't nothin' ag'in you, Reverdy —"

He looked up to the flushed triumphant and streaming face of Mrs. Pikey.

"How did they git this here note into Plunk's hands?"

He asked this in an angry voice, as if cross-questioning a witness of doubtful honesty.

She told him the incident of the little old mozo stopping and accepting food and "tipping" the cook. "The cook give it to Reverdy when the desert mozo had ridden way off."

"And Plunk didn't let you see this note — nor warn you that they was raiders about?"

"No! He tore the note up, threw it into the mesquite — and hopped to his cayuse, gallopin' off like a scairt rabbit!"

The sheriff's brows were knitted this time in a fierce — a brutal frown. His huge brown fists were doubled, the leathery skin stretched over the knuckles.

"I saw his face turn as white as this here paper, when he read what was wrote down there!" Mrs. Pikey affirmed, her own fists on her hips, her damp face grim, and victorious.

"Sure he turned white!" affirmed Wink Pikey, who had been taught the moral significance of this whole episode, until he knew it by heart. He did not understand it all. His mother and the old prospector who had saved them from the desert had talked it over—from every angle—and Wink had listened, as a child listening to an absorbing fairy-tale. The part of the story which had most impressed him, however, was that the "hundreds of wild Indians" who had attacked them were afraid of Plunk Reverdy and had bartered with him to stay out of the fight.

"*You* say he turned white, kid?"

"Whiter'n alkali when the sun shines on it!" affirmed Wink Pikey. "But the Injuns was afraid of him, too! They wrote that thar note so's he wouldn't kill any of 'em. If he'd been there he'd probably killed a couple hundred of 'em."

"Say, look here—how many were there of these renegades that got Plunk Reverdy so scairt?" the sheriff asked. Perhaps the very size of their number might have overwhelmed him, awakening some latent inborn fear that he had never before shown.

"Millions!" said Wink Pikey.

"They was nine altogether," said Mrs. Pikey assuredly. "We had more than enough chanst to count 'em when they opened fire."

"All Injuns!" said Wink Pikey. "With feathers and tomahawks."

"Shut up—and leave the sheriff get at the

truth," his mother snapped. "They was just ordinary breeds—with shirts and overalls and Mex sombreros. Some of 'em were white. Then they was the old mozo who brought the note. That made ten."

"Good God!" the sheriff gasped.

Mrs. Pikey stared. So did Wink.

"To think he'd show yaller because of a handful of desert renegades! Look here!" He turned sharply upon Mrs. Pikey. "Might be he turned white when he read that note because he was ragin' mad. I've seen men act that-away." His voice wavered. "Do you figure, ma'am," he had to ask piteously, "that Plunk was mad—or afraid?"

"Which does it look like, Mr. Sheriff?"

Hornuff thought a moment with a tortured look in his eyes. He got up, clapped his tall-peaked sombrero on his head, and hitched his belt.

"Well, I'm hittin' the trail right now, Mrs. Pikey. We've got to find what's left of Jackson Brower—and his ole aunt."

He stopped at the door and said over his bulging shoulder:

"Thanks for lettin' me see that note."

CHAPTER XII

THE YALLER COYOTE

REVERDY was returning to the scene of devastation, the smoldering fire of the wagon, the patch of sand which was strewn with the victims of the raid. When within a hundred yards of the spot he saw clearly enough what was left of his little outfit.

The two Mexicans were dead; all the horses were gone; two mules were lying in the sand, likewise dead. Jackson Brower was crawling toward the aged and dazed woman. There was no sign anywhere of Mrs. Pikey and her son.

Now, before Plunk approached any closer than that hundred yards, Brower saw him. The sight seemed to revivify the old man, for he dragged himself to his feet. He was an imposing figure, partly because of his height, his silvery mane, his rugged face which had now turned gray. With one arm hanging limp, the other pointing a shaking and accusing finger at the approaching man, he cried out vehemently:

“You stay away from here, you yaller coyote, or I’ll kill you!”

Plunk’s natural supposition was that Brower’s wound and the hot sun had affected his head.

"Im not one of 'em, pard; I'm Plunk Reverdy. Don't you know me?"

"*Know* you!" the other fairly screamed, his chest heaving. "Yes, afore God, I know you now. Didn't know you before. The whole world'll know you now. Plunk Reverdy, eh? Don't come closer—I'm warnin' you!" He knelt down and picked up a rock. "Plunk Reverdy—p-tht!" He spat with a face-twisting convulsion, as if the name were dirt in his mouth.

"What's come over you, pard!" Plunk asked quietly, as he walked toward the old man. "The renegades have gone. They've done their work, haven't they? I'm Plunk. You know me. What is that rock for?"

He was within a few yards of Brower, when the latter, as if summoning all his remaining strength, hurled the rock. Reverdy was too astonished to duck. It was a fairly good sized rock and thrown with unbelievable ferocity. It caught him in the chest.

"What the hell? Are you crazy?"

Old Brower had fallen from the exertion. He clutched at his wound.

From near-by came the toneless voice of his old aunt.

"What was the shootin' for? Ain't it over? What are you fightin' now? Where's Mrs. Pikey? Where's the kid? What are them mules lyin' there for?"

It was a scene that no man could ever forget:

the aged crone mumbling stupidly, as if trying to awake from a hideous dream; the crumpled figure of Brower, lying there on the sand again, nursing his wound, the sun shining with a terrific white fire on his silvery hair and in his red eyes; and finally the tall figure of Plunk Reverdy, standing, crushed, speechless, defeated. He was like a giant of strength standing ankle deep in quicksand.

Pride and consternation were in conflict on his pale face. His thin, strong lips were parted—as if they had lost a strength that had been born there, a strength they had never been without. They trembled. He was smiling, while his keen eyes were smoldering, widely opened, though the pupils were contracted by the glare of the sun. It gave him the appearance of a blind man looking straight at you, but seeing nothing.

Jackson Brower looked up at this looming figure of what had once been a man. The old fellow's face was racked with the pain of his wound, and the contorted features were made rigid by a smile of withering contempt.

"I told you, Plunk Reverdy," he said in a voice that was now soft and cold, "if you come nearer I'll stone you! I'll kill you! If I'd had a six-gun I'd kill you afore you come within fifty feet of me. The air's foul all around me. Git out so's I kin breathe!" The coolness went; the softness went. "Git out, I said! Git out, for God's sake, so's I kin breathe some air!"

He was indeed gasping. It was horrible.

Reverdy went to the old woman. "Where's the water? Here, get some water. And go give it to him—he's out of his head."

He rummaged around in one of the saddle packs for a canteen. The two-gallon tin cans which were part of the mule packs were gone. That evidently had been part of the loot. A very short search revealed the fact that the canteens were part of the loot likewise.

"No water—and the old fellow daft with the heat!" Plunk exclaimed.

"Water?" the crone mumbled. "Yes—I must have water. I'll feel better—when I have water. What's the matter with *him*?" She saw Jackson Brower lying in the sand.

"He's hit—you know what I mean. There was shooting, ma'am. The old fellow was hit. We must take care of him. Where's some tape? I must bind up his wound, and then go for water."

"Yes—we must have water," she answered stupidly. "Is the shootin' over? What? You say it is? That's good. Mrs. Pikey all right—and the kid? You don't know?"

She got up and started to look about. She was like some one still asleep and wandering around—a strange enough picture in that boiling sun.

"Look here, ma'am," Plunk said gently, "you lie down. Over here—see? Shade's here. Don't be walking about; don't get in the sun. Yes, I'll look after *him*."

He helped her to a shady spot, and from the

exhaustion of that harrowing experience and that murderous sun she sank down in the bed he arranged for her.

He went over then to Jackson Brower.

Again there was the curse. The lifting of a rock. The vituperation—an outburst that left old Brower the crumpled scarecrow of a man.

It was no use stirring up that storm again. Not while the old fellow was—as it appeared—delirious.

“All right, then, old pard,” Plunk said, throwing him the bandage and cotton which he had found in Pikey’s duffel bag. “Bind up your own wound. I’ll go for water, and try to get some mounts. I know where there’s a mucker’s diggings.”

Curses were hurled at him, but he was deaf to them now.

He shrugged his shoulder. Why quarrel with a wounded old man? It was pitiful. The hot-headed fellow had probably been brooding on the fact that Plunk was not on the scene when the attack came. Well, that was the worst trick fate had ever played on any man in God’s world! So Plunk adjudged it. He had lost. There was no doubt about that. But he had to take it all as a good loser. He couldn’t think about it or cry over it now. Too much work to be done. Important, vital work. He must get water and horses; he must find Mrs. Pikey and the red-headed boy.

"You'll need help with that wound," he said.

"Oh, no, I won't," cried the old man, holding one end of the bandage in his teeth and winding with his good hand. "Not from you. Ain't a man in the world will ever accept *your* help again."

"Wash your wound out with this, then," Plunk said. "And I'll be back after awhile with water—and help." He tossed an aluminium flask of whisky which he kept on his hip on these desert expeditions.

Brower spat at it and reached out threateningly for another rock. "This here rock is for any yaller dog that keeps on snoopin' around me. You hear that, *hombre?*"

Plunk ignored this. His duties were beginning to loom larger and larger. Horses gone, mules shot, two Mexes dead, Brower wounded and lo-coed, and Mrs. Pikey and her kid missing.

"Where's Mrs. Pikey—and the little shaver?" he asked.

He knew well enough that he would get no civil answer from Brower and no sane one from the old woman.

But Brower vouchsafed to say:

"Yes, Mrs. Pikey—she left a message for you—afore she escaped with the kid."

"They escaped!" Plunk cried eagerly.

"She said she'd admire for me to give you your banjo afore I kicked you out of camp."

The banjo happened to be near Brower at that

moment. It was probably what suggested this grim little pleasantry to him. He threw the banjo toward Plunk Reverdy.

"If you cain't use a gun, Mr. Skunk, you kin use this! "

Of course Mrs. Pikey had said no such thing. But the gibe struck home good and hard.

The instrument hit Reverdy in the back as he was walking off toward the stream-bed trail.

All four strings vibrated, making a pathetic and tuneless cry.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ALIBI

REVERDY'S search through the whole cañon, through those barrancas of furnace heat, those cactus-choked gulches, the deep boulder wash, revealed no trace of Mrs. Pikey and her boy. There was that helpless old woman and Jackson Brower with his wound. They must be cared for, watched over more sedulously than ever before.

To leave them in a futile search for Mrs. Pikey and the kid would be repeating that disastrous mistake he had already made. If they had been helpless chickens in the presence of hawks before, think how helpless they were now!

Plunk made repeated little forays in search of the missing members of his band; in search of water and of food.

The night and the following day went by. Sojuaro sap to drink, cactus pear, Spanish acorns and a lone jack rabbit were all that fortune granted the three miserable castaways.

The next day Reverdy took a long hike to a sink in an arroyo where in the old days he had once found gyp water. There it was almost a saline with a little milky, salty stuff in the bottom of a clay-filled basin.

It was good enough to keep them for the few days Plunk intended remaining in that cañon. He could rig up an apparatus for distilling water. His two charges could regain something of their strength. Old Brower's wound would improve each day. Then, if no chance help showed up, they could strike out for a mesa where Plunk knew of a mucker's diggings.

By the end of that second day old Brower was too weak to vent any more of his energy in reviling the youth who was taking care of him. It must be said, however, that for a long time he refused to touch the food prepared by those out-cast hands. Hunger and thirst and pain gradually mollified his hate. He became submissive—that is to say, in everything except his tongue.

Thus it was that at sunset of that day Plunk took the gaunt, emaciated fellow, slung him over his back as he might have slung a sack of grain, and started out on the tedious, deadly hike for the water pocket.

It was a strange enough picture—that youth with his wan face covered with a reddish stubble, carrying a burden that was moaning, swearing, cursing him at every step. And there was the old crone stumbling along after them, mumbling, whining, sinking to the sand at every few yards.

“Are the Indians after us?” she kept asking. “Is there goin’ to be more shootin’? Ain’t Mrs. Pikey back yet? Are we goin’ home tonight? I cain’t go any farther; not without water. I’m

powerful thirsty, I am. I'm a pore ole woman, and I got to go home soon."

This was the trio of characters which Sheriff Hornuff and his posse found a few days later.

Reverdy was the first to see the band of horsemen silhouetted against the rising sun—far up yonder on the cañon rim. He waved his sombrero to them, then ran eagerly up the trail toward the side of the cañon.

It was near the base of the granite walls, after Hornuff and his men had zigzagged down a perilous descent, that Reverdy and the posse met.

He saw immediately by the grim expression on every face that the news of the disaster had already reached civilization.

There were two chances of their hearing of what had happened. It had leaked out through some member of the renegade band—a very improbable supposition—or else Mrs. Pikey and her boy had been found.

The sheriff and his men seemed slow in speaking. It was Plunk who cried out first:

"Have you found Mrs. Pikey yet, chief?"

"I have," the other said. His men drew up and sat immobile, speechless in their saddles. There was no doubt either of the fact that they blamed Plunk for what had happened.

He expected it; he blamed himself. He had brooded for the last few nights over it—what with the scourging of old Jackson Brower. He

could explain it all, and he *would* explain. Nevertheless, he knew he was to blame.

"And the little boy—the red-headed boy, chief?" he asked eagerly. "Has he been found?"

"He has," said Hornuff as grimly as before. "But we're lookin' for ol' Brower and his aunt."

"They're safe. Brower was hit. But his wound's doing all right. They're safe—back there."

A movement went over the crowd—a breaking of tension. This was what they had ridden into the desert to find out. It was a movement of enormous relief.

"And the girl, chief," Plunk asked with still more eagerness, "Brower's girl—does she know what's happened?"

"Oh, she knows by this time," said the sheriff.

Plunk looked from face to face eagerly. They had all been his friends—his cronies, some had been his pards. The veterinary, the harness-mender, the barber, two barkeeps, three or four prospectors.

They would naturally hold him to account; no doubt about that. How could he blame them? They had not yet heard the truth. When the truth was told—then they would greet him like old friends.

"Hello, there, Bill! Hello, Soggy! Hello, Jack—" He could not help greeting them. He was overjoyed. Nor could he help noticing how coldly they returned his greeting. In fact, they

were men who would have leaped from their horses and taken him into their arms, slapped him on the back, punched him, whooped with joy. Considering this as the normal greeting under the circumstances, Reverdy saw perfectly well that they did not greet him at all.

His eyes came back to the sheriff.

Now in old Hornuff's face there seemed to be a slight element of doubt. Something had happened which the sheriff could not understand. To all appearances Plunk Reverdy had turned yellow. But this—in Sheriff Hornuff's mind—was a contradiction in terms. He studied Reverdy's face with a searching but baffled look. The truth would out, sooner or later; that was Hornuff's philosophy. Right now was not the time for an inquiry. There were other matters.

"Take us to where Brower and the ol' lady's at," he said quietly.

Plunk did not move. He was as one smitten. The blood left his face. His eyes—faded by the torture of that desert sun, began to blaze with a pale fire.

"I said take us to where Brower's at," the sheriff repeated. "Give him one of the mules, Soggy."

A deputy leading a string of mules rode forward. He led one of the beasts, which had a small food and water pack, to Plunk.

Reverdy stuck his elbow into the mule's side, pressing him out of the way. He still stood, look-

ing up at Sheriff Hornuff—like a man who is trying to place a strange face.

One of the men called out: "Brower's down there in an arroyo, chief. I seen the campfire when we were on the cañon rim."

"All right, let's go," Hornuff said.

"Wait, chief," Reverdy interrupted. "And all of you wait. I want to say something."

Sheriff Hornuff was on the point of shoving his heels into his horse's flanks and pressing past. But on looking down into the gaunt, unshaven face, and into those pale smoldering eyes, he seemed again checked by a torturing doubt. He waited. His deputies waited behind him.

"What the hell do you men mean by this anyway?" Reverdy began. "You all know me—and you know what I've done. I've made a mistake—that's clear. No denying that. I'll be the last to deny it. This whole business is my fault. And I'll take my medicine. That is, I'll take a certain kind of medicine. But I won't stand here being stared at as if I'd killed some one."

The faces under those broad-brimmed sombreros were still like rusty iron. He kept searching eagerly for a friendly mouth.

"Oh, all right," he was saying while he looked from one to the other. "Two Mexes were killed—Brower's mozos. I'm to blame for that, too. I killed 'em—if you want to put it that way. I mean if I hadn't pulled a boner, they might be alive to-day."

He added with a grim touch of his own: "Also two mules. I killed two mules. Their blood's on my hands." This brought no response. "But Brower's all right. So's his ol' aunt. So's Mrs. Pikey and her kid—according to you. Now that's the score. The outfit is busted up—horses rustled—and I'm to blame. Now have your say, sheriff, and get it over with."

"My say is only this, Reverdy," old Hornuff announced, quietly. "I appointed you my deputy for to be responsible for some human lives. Well—as you yourself say—you didn't make good. Why any more palaverin'? Just how much you're to blame I don't know. It looks bad. But I ain't accusin' you out and out without more investigatin', which I ain't got time for it now. Besides, if my men start palaverin' about this business, I ain't quite so sure where they'll fetch up at. Let's close it all this-away: I'm releasin' you here and now from your duties as my deputy. We'll take keer of Brower and the ol' woman. We'll bring 'em home. From this moment on your responsibility concernin' them is over."

Plunk took this more or less stoically. No use denying that he hadn't made good. Well, the only thing to do now was to take his medicine. He had wanted to see Brower home safe—but as the sheriff said, he was released now from the stewardship.

"All right, chief," he said finally. "You put 'em into my keeping—and you have a right to

take 'em out. I'll withdraw. But first let me say this: I'm taking the blame for only one thing — for letting that little outfit you intrusted to my care, out of my sight — for just two minutes. The raiders were trailing us — and they waited for me to get out of sight. Then they lit in.

"That's where I lost. Blame me for that — all of you. But if you think that beyond that, any one of you would have acted in a different way — if any one of you suggests that to me, I'll kill him."

This brought a murmur, reins were tightened, horses champed at the movement of their riders. Some of the men grumbled. Others changed the expression on their faces for the first time, and sneered as if the idea of Plunk Reverdy ever killing a man was a good joke.

"Now hold on, men," the sheriff said. "I told you we ain't goin' to have no all-around palaver. I'm handlin' this. No one else." He turned again to the man on foot.

"Reverdy," he said. "If you say you only let the outfit out of your sight for two minutes, you ain't coincidin' with the story Mrs. Pikey give us."

"She told you I didn't get back till the raid was over, perhaps?" Plunk said readily.

"She did. And it kind of looks as if the raid took longer'n two minutes. She said it lasted a good half hour. And then a hour later when she was trailin' through the mesquite with her kid,

she didn't see you even then — anywhere nigh the premises."

"No — perhaps not until two good hours," Reverdy explained. "I've been figuring it all out since. I was lying unconscious up there in a draw near the top of the cañon."

"You were lyin' *unconscious*!" Sheriff Hornuff shouted. The sneers of the posse developed. The barber was laughing; the veterinary was swearing; the harness-mender had his tongue in his cheek. A chuckle went over the whole gang.

"My horse — the horse you saw at Mule Town that morning when we left," Plunk hastened to explain to all, "turned outlaw in the blink of an eye. It threw me, forestruck, began to pound me. I fell down a bank. When I came to, I ran to the cañon rim again. The raid was over."

The laughs developed further. They were not chuckles or sneers. They were guffaws. The men, emboldened by their own numbers, jeered without mercy:

"That hoss was the gentlest critter ever born!" said the veterinary.

"It was!" said the sheriff. "I seen it!"

"Turned outlaw! *That* hoss!" cried another. "It was a ole work hoss turned into a lamb! Outlaw! Zowie!"

"Unconscious! Hoo-wah! Unconscious durin' a couple of hours of raidin' and murderin'! That's the best ever!"

"Lyin' in a ditch! *Very* convenient!" cried

another. "And you the best bronc peeler on the whole damned range! Oh, yes, that gentle old stock hoss throw'd you all righto! Oh, yes!"

"I've heard of alibis—and alibis," said the horse doctor. "But I ain't never heard one as good as this. It's no use, Plunk. The truth has come out—which you may not know. But Mrs. Pikey showed us a letter which same was wrote by the outlaws to you personally before the raid."

Plunk stared. This was a serious blow. Yet why was it so serious after all? He was innocent. The note had nothing to do with his act. Except—

"It was to kill the man who brought the note that drew me up to the cañon—away from the outfit!" Plunk shouted excitedly.

"And you remained there—unconscious!" laughed some one.

"Figured it out to the minute!" chuckled another.

"And he's goin' to kill any one who says he'd of done different!" laughed another.

"Are *you* saying it?" Reverdy asked, drawing his gun.

The man—a barkeep with narrow eyes and a long chin—dwindled away. His horse felt the touch on its mouth and backed gently behind another.

"Is any one else saying it?" Reverdy asked.

Some of the men had drawn. But no one seemed to be of a mind to invite a duel. Reverdy

might have been the yellowest coward this side of the Rio Grande, but he had a lightning hand.

"Now then, men," Sheriff Hornuff announced. "This palaver comes to a close right here. Reverdy, we've listened to your statement, and I'm advisin' that the less you say along them same lines, the better. The best thing for you to do right now is to shag along home. Don't stick around this posse—or they'll be some hot gun-shootin'."

He turned to his gang. "Come on, men; we got to get Brower and the ol' lady. Pete, you ride back to Mule Town as quick as your hoss will take you, and give out the news. Tell that gal—I mean Nell Brower—that her granddad is safe and that we're bringin' him home. She's most like slowly goin' crazy waitin' for us."

Pete immediately wheeled his horse.

"How about your food pack, Pete?" the sheriff called.

"I kin stop at a couple muckers' cabins on the way home," the other rejoined.

With this he rode off. And Hornuff and his men turned down the cañon bottom toward the arroyo where Brower and his aunt were waiting. Reverdy found himself alone, with the mule they had given him.

For the space of a few minutes he was so stunned by this whole scene that he was incapable of action. He stood there staring at the riders as they wound down the trail through mesquite

and cactus. His mule stood dumb, swishing his tail at flies. He was innocent of the torture that was going on in his new master—a torture worse than any hunger or thirst, or strangles or thumps that old beast had ever felt.

Finally the animal pawed at the sand, and looked around at the brooding, gaunt figure. He might have said: "Come on, pard, let's follow them. I'm a sociable mule and I like to stick along with the bunch."

That of course is what any mule would have thought under the circumstances.

But Reverdy waited. He was half of a mind to go down and help bring old Brower and the woman home. But—as the sheriff had said—he was released of all responsibility now. He had done everything humanly possible since that raid—to help Brower and the woman. Nothing more could be done. To trail along after them all the way home, laying himself bare to more of their jibes was unthinkable.

So he thought of riding home. Yes, there was the girl. He had made his report to the sheriff; he must make his report now to her.

She would be waiting, as had been said, in a frenzy of hope and fear for the return of the posse. No doubt if the townspeople would let her, she would have ridden out into Soda Mesa Desert alone in search of her grandfather.

Reverdy decided that this was his next and final duty to discharge. After telling her—well,

then, the whole damnable incident would be a thing of the past.

He mounted, took a seat between the food pack and the rawhide-covered water-can and hit off at a slow pace for Mule Town.

And as he rode, Plunk Reverdy's heart was beating with anticipation and doubt. He was eager to see the girl—and tell her his side of the story. That was the anticipation.

As to the doubt: He never ceased to fear for one moment during that harrowing ride, just what the girl would say to him.

CHAPTER XIV

“HE CAME UNTO HIS OWN”

ON arriving at Mule Town Reverdy was well nigh exhausted. He had passed several muckers' cabins where customarily he stopped for food and water. He did not stop now. He had slept for a few hours during the heat of the two days' journey. But all night under the stars he trailed along.

He arrived at the little gambling town in the morning, when it looked as forsaken as any of those “ghost-towns” on the desert which had sprung up in bonanza days and had been left years gone by to the sand drifts and coyotes.

Of course there were signs of life; smoke from the chowcart, and from the rows of shacks. A pinto or two stood at the snubbing-posts outside the honky-tonks. A Mexican kid was wallowing in the sand.

We have seen how in the past Reverdy had entered his home town with drums beating and colors flying. A round of drinks at the Rex Cantina, a lot of yipping and back slapping greeted his periodic returns from the desert.

This time, however, he entered, mounted on an old alkali-dusted mule. The inglorious and

patient critter stumbled quietly along in the sand. The scarecrow on its back did not call out to Jim Barr, the blacksmith—which was the usual practice.

Jim Barr was probably having breakfast with his half-breed wife. At any rate he did not know that Plunk Reverdy had come back. Nor did any of the barkeeps along the main street.

Plunk hitched his mule in front of the Rex Cantina. It was not his mule so no one who chanced to see it during the next few minutes, knew that Reverdy had returned to town. Reverdy found the barkeep strewing sawdust over the floor of the Rex Cantina.

The latter turned around, and saw what he thought was some carcass brought to life.

"What the—Oh!" he gasped. "It's you—come back, eh! Plunk Reverdy! Who'd of thought that! Good God! Back to Mule Town!"

"All right, Joe. Get up here behind the bar. I'm thirsty."

The barkeep obeyed, studying the scarecrow from head to foot, as if he still had a grave doubt in his mind about the human substance of that grotesque and sorry figure. He went to his post, took out a towel, wiped the mahogany with a sweep or two, reached for the ordered drink not once letting his gaze wander from the guest.

"Have one yourself, Joe," Plunk said mechanically. If he had stopped for one moment to consider, he would not have said it.

The barkeep demurred, his thick lips were trembling in an uncertain groping for a diplomatic sentence of refusal. He saw the squint in Plunk's eye, however, and resolved to be discreet.

"Don't mind if I do, Plunk," he said, pouring himself some ginger ale, as was his custom.

They went through the perfunctory ritual. The barkeep—uneasy, curious, always careful in dealing with strangers or fighters, sheepmen, Mexes or cowards—said cheerily:

"All right, Plunk, tell me about it. The posse—Brower—the ol' woman—everything."

"Brower and the old woman are safe. I want to see Brower's girl right away—and tell her."

"Ah, Brower's gal! Poor little woman. She's nigh to goin' crazy. Actually outfitted herself for to ride into the desert *alone*! Been up all last night—and the nights before.

"Some ranchers had to trail after and argufy that she was makin' matters ten times worse tryin' to go out there—when all the best riders in town have went already. And the womenfolk have all argufied hour after hour—stayin' with her here at the Rex Hotel, makin' her sleep an hour or so out of the twenty-four."

The barkeep called to someone through the door behind him: "Here, Pedro! You go tell Nell Brower her granddad is alive. And that the posse has found him—and that Plunk Reverdy—"

"I'll see her myself," Plunk interrupted.

"Don't tell her about me—just tell her her folks are all right."

"Don't tell her Plunk Reverdy's here," the barkeep called through the door. "He'll see her later."

Reverdy stayed there looking at himself in the speckled mirror over the bar. He was a ludicrous sight, if ever there was one. He had to present himself to the girl—as a man who had tried and failed. He looked the part. His face was contorted—partly with fatigue, but mainly with a consuming thirst. His mouth, throat, stomach felt like salt beef. He could scarcely speak. He said no more for a while.

The barkeep likewise was silent. No more perfunctory exchange of drinks followed.

"I've got to be careful," Plunk said to himself. "I'll stick to just plain seltzer." He drank till his head turned hot. After sipping for a long while the blessed feeling of moisture came to his forehead.

The croupier's wife, a handsome woman with strands of yellow hair which she was combing, came out from some back room. She stared at Plunk.

"Hello, Kate," the latter said.

The woman's lips hardened. "Hello, Reverdy." She did not ask him about his banjo—which was always her first request in past days.

The barkeep repeated the news about Brower.

"The little gal ought to know," Kate said.

“We’ve sent the news to her.”

By this time an old man had entered. He was a little runt scarcely more than five feet, with a tobacco-stained beard. He was not afraid to say what he wanted to any one; because he had never been touched by any man, never been threatened, never had a gun drawn on him. Every man in Mule Town was bigger than he. So he had a license. And he was thoroughly hated.

“Hello, Slinkey,” Plunk said.

The other pulled at his scrawny, dirty beard. He didn’t return the greeting. He looked over to the barkeep instead, and remarked:

“Thought you kept Injuns and breeds out of this cantina, Joe.”

Reverdy smiled, as if pitying the old fellow’s sorry attempt at insult. It was a puppy barking at the heels of a big patient dog. But I imagine that smile of Plunk’s would have frightened anybody else in Mule Town, because he showed his teeth.

The croupier’s wife was standing, her hands on her hips, a comb in one; her foot tapping softly on the sawdust. No doubt she was thinking up some gibe of her own. She wasn’t afraid of Plunk either.

Finally she came to the conclusion that the most cutting thing she could say was the very sentence with which she had always greeted Plunk—a sentence which had a different meaning now:

“Where’s your banjo at, Plunk?”

Reverdy flushed to the roots of his hair. His forehead was now sopping wet. He wiped it, and turned again to sip at his seltzer.

"Ain't given up your banjo too, Plunk, same as you have your six-gun?" the woman went on.

The old fellow with the yellow-stained beard chuckled dryly. "I reckon that's why nobody's turned out to see yer," he said. "Because you ain't playin' your banjo. Where did you leave it at?"

"In the bushes where you hid durin' the raid?" the woman asked, her eyebrows raised, her mouth wide in a grin.

"Reckon you folks better shut up," the bar-keep cautioned apprehensively.

"No," Plunk Reverdy said. "Let them say what they want. Then I'll have my say. Meanwhile Joe, you go out in the street and call everyone out of their shacks, and tell 'em to come in here. I want to buy 'em a drink. All Mule Town I want. And when they're in here, I'll say what I've been planning to say. I'll say what I should have said to the sheriff and his men. Except that I was too flabbergasted to think it up then. I have it all straight now. Go on, Joe—get out and invite the whole town in."

Joe was afraid of Plunk. Joe didn't have the license of either a woman or an old dwarfish man. He had to obey.

He went out. For a few minutes Reverdy stood sipping seltzer, while those two tormentors worked

upon him with a refined torture. Many were the gibes they threw at him and he heard them all, even though he pretended not to be listening. Under other circumstances he might have taken the old man by the scruff of the neck and thrown him into the water trough outside.

But that would have been unwise now. He was already branded a coward by Mule Town. To remedy that, it would do no good manhandling a white-bearded weakling out there in the main street. He must wait until some big man insulted him.

He stood there, brooding, outwardly calm, inwardly writhing, as they flayed him.

Then came the barkeep with three Mexican mozos.

The barkeep had an unhappy expression on his beefy, unshaved face. He must be more diplomatic than ever:

"I'm sorry, Plunk. But they won't nobody else come—exceptin' these hombres here. I spoke to several cowboys and such, and they asked if Brower was safe—and if the posse had found him. But they wouldn't come in to drink. They said they weren't dry this early in the mornin'."

Plunk looked down at the ragged mozos. These were the outcasts of Mule Town who belonged on the other side of the street. They were always thirsty. They did not quite understand perhaps the moral significance of taking a drink with a man. They did not understand that by so doing

they put themselves on an equal basis with that man. Perhaps they would have demurred drinking with Plunk Reverdy—just as the cowmen out there had done.

From the grimy, high-cheeked faces of the Mexicans, Plunk looked at the croupier's wife. She was combing her hair again. She seemed shabby too—handsome though she was. Frowzy in clothes and features. He looked then at the scurvy little runt with the dirty beard.

Very well, then! These—the rock bottom of Mule Town—should hear what he had to say.

"All right, Joe. Set 'em up for everyone in the room."

"Exceptin' me," said the old man, moseying off to one of the gaming tables and setting out a pack of cards for solo.

"Count me out likewise," said the croupier's wife—shuffling away in her Chinese slippers to the darkness under one of the galleries.

Thus it was that Plunk Reverdy drank with three Mexican tramps.

"Now then, gents," he said, "what I'm telling you—you will most likely tell everyone else. You too, Joe. It's no secret. Dispense it across your bar from now on as a piece of news.

"It's not about the raid. It looks as if you've had your fill of that in this town—and all of its ins and outs. I won't excuse anything I've done. That's not what I've called you here for.

"I'm going back further than the raid. Some-

thing that happened to me before I started out with Brower and his outfit. Before I came to Mule Town from my last prospecting trip.”

One of the Mexicans stuck his thumbs in his beaded vest and moved up to Plunk in an affectionate fashion. Another, who didn't understand English, looked about at the paper garlands hanging from the galleries and booths. He had never before had the honor of drinking in the Rex Cantina. The third watched the glasses thirstily, shoving his empty glass this way and that, according to the proximity of the barkeep.

“I guess everybody's heard in this town that a bandit was killed down below Soda Mesa a few days back.”

“Sure, *señor*.. He's call' Tarante. Ees very bad hombre. Some man shoot him in the back.”

“Exactly. That's just it. In the back. Well, I'm the man!”

The croupier's wife, standing there under the gallery, combing her hair, heard this confession. The drama of this once beloved hero making a confession to three Mexicans, whom he was treating, could not escape her. Nor could it escape the old duffer playing solo.

The latter looked up, his parrot eyes blinking.

“So, ho!” he exclaimed. “You're the man who plugged Tarante! I wouldn't of believed it afore this. But now I believe it. Hid away off somewheres in the brush and sniped at him. Yes, that's you all over, Reverdy!”

"That's just the point!" Reverdy said. "There are lots of fights when you'll get a man in the back. You all know that. A man rustling your horse is a good case. That was what was happening. Tarante was rustling my horse."

"I took a long range chance at him, and got him. Then I heard Tarante had always boasted no man would ever stand up in front of him and fight—but that some one might get him sooner or later—from a distance and when his back was turned. That sort of got my vanity—"

"Your what?" the croupier's wife called out from afar.

This tripped Reverdy up. He flushed then turned toward her. It was the first time he had answered an insult from her lips.

"That's where I made my first mistake, ma'am. Being sensitive as you might say, concernin' my reputation as a—"

"Your *reputation!*" the woman laughed. "Wow!"

"I mean the name I had as a gun-fighter."

"You've got a fine name as a gun-fighter now, hombre," the solo player called out from his table.

"Cork up there, you!" the barkeep said out of the side of his mouth, "or I'll throw you out."

"If I hadn't been so all-fired proud," Reverdy said, "I would have boasted about killing Tarante. He was a bad customer, and to represent him with a notch in your gun would have

made some fellows swell around like a puffin' toad. I wish I had now. Explaining it all now seems kind of weak. In particular when most hombres aren't much more than ten years old mentally.”

“It seems weak to me,” said the solo player, “and I'm seventy-six years old, I am.”

Plunk ordered the drinks set up again, and the thirsty Mexican tramps grew more and more brotherly.

“Now then, gents, I told you this for a reason. It leads up to something. Tell everybody you meet that I killed Tarante. But tell 'em that I did it while he was rustling my horse. You would have all patted me on the back and asked me to sing songs for you, if I had told you that a few days ago—”

“Yes, but it's different now,” laughed the solo player.

“Shot him in the back—” said the woman combing her hair. “Well we'll all believe that.”

“What I'm leading up to is this,” Plunk went on hastily: “Tarante sent me a horse—saying he had repented as he was dying. It was a horse in return for mine. That's the blood bay with the gray whiskers and stars on his face—which you all saw the last time I was in Mule Town.”

“I seen him,” said the solo player. “It weren't no bandit's hoss. I know hosses. That thar was a sheep man's hoss. Too gentle for cow work.”

"It was a trick horse," Plunk announced. "One which looked gentler than any critter I've ever seen. But he had the trick of turning on his owner—when least expected and trying to kill him. I don't mean just bucking his rider off. I mean trying to kill him. Same as a stallion with a brood of mares."

"Oh, yes—he kind of looked that-away!" scoffed the solo player.

Plunk Reverdy felt as if he were talking against an ocean tide, bidding it recede. He had been cool until now, but he suddenly felt a fever grip him, shaking him to the marrow of his bones. His voice lost its forced modulation. He was frantic. But he intended to have his say:

"That horse Tarante gave me turned upon me like a demon just as the raid was starting—"

"He must of timed it pretty well!" laughed the old solo player. "Quite a convenient hoss to have under them thar circumstances."

"He bucked me off, tramped me, threw me down a bank—"

"A very well trained hoss—savin' his rider from gettin' into a fight!" laughed the woman.

"And I lay there unconscious—"

"*Until the raid was over!*" The solo player was chuckling steadily, as if every card he turned up had a good joke written on it.

"There's the story!" Plunk cried in a rage.

"And you're goin' to stick to it!" guffawed the old man.

“Do you Mexes understand that?” Plunk said with a deadly look in his eye.

Two of them were afraid. One—the affectionate one—who desired the argument to go on, and the treating to continue likewise, made the mistake of suggesting:

“I understand, *señor*. But this man Tarante, he always rustled horses. Ees hard to understand that he would give one away.”

This was a most unlucky moment for that Mexican, a most unlucky suggestion. He was a big hombre, with a square jaw. The jaw was a good target. Plunk Reverdy caught it with an uppercut which put a soul satisfying period to his whole speech. The Mexican sank comfortably into his bed of sawdust.

His two companions fled in mad panic, banged open the swinging doors, where they crashed into a crowd of cowmen and miners who had listened to the whole incident from outside.

The solo player was convulsed with chuckles that shook his feeble little frame, as if some one had him by the collar. The woman was laughing harshly, uproariously. Plunk Reverdy, whose madly heated blood was oozing from his split knuckles in a cooling and delightful sensation, swung off toward the door.

A herder met him. “Brower’s gal wants to see you, Plunk. They woke her up, and, bein’ she slept with her clothes on, she’s ready—and crazy to see you.”

Plunk did not immediately go into the vestibule of the hotel. He went to the street for air.

The sunlight seemed to dazzle his eyes after the darkness of the cantina. He looked about with a strained expression at the group of old men and boys who had gathered under the outer gallery of the shack. Most of the good gunmen of the town had gone on the sheriff's relief expedition. Those that were left regarded Plunk with a peculiar mixture of curiosity and contempt. They were of no importance—as men—yet they had been Plunk's friends not so very long ago.

They stood there, somewhat taken aback at his appearance. What a change had come over him! How the mighty had fallen! He was in rags—his torso partly nude, with strips of his shirt hanging. His knuckles were bleeding, his face was haggard, unshaven. His eyes were pale, squinting.

His mouth tightened as if in pain. He was bereft of his good looks; bereft of his reputation; bereft of honor; bereft of all friends. As he came out of that cantina he looked as if he had been through the torture of an inquisition. Yes, body and soul, that is just what had happened.

"Go into the Rex Hotel, where the gal's at," an old rancher piped up. "And tell her all about it."

This was said dryly enough, and the crowd saw the sarcasm of it. But no one, needless to say, could laugh. The spectacle was one of pity now.

"She ain't waitin' in the hotel," some one spoke up. "Here she comes now—crazy to hear about it."

Reverdy looked up against the sun. The girl hurried down to the board sidewalk, hatless.

Some of the women folk followed her.

The crowd of men and boys under the gallery waited, with a tense expectancy. They must have all anticipated witnessing one of the most dramatic scenes that could ever take place on the sidewalks of Mule Town.

Here was Plunk Reverdy, whom the girl had sent as a protector of her grandfather, about to meet her and explain. But the gaping men and boys were disappointed.

That scene never took place, thank God. Plunk Reverdy was writhing under the lashing he had experienced inside of that cantina. It was only at the hands of a detestable old man and a still more detestable woman; but a lashing it was, and it had left the victim raw.

Just as the girl came out of the hotel Plunk Reverdy slipped back through the swinging doors of the cantina.

The barkeep was there resuscitating the dozing Mex. The woman was standing over the two; the old duffer had left his solo game and was giving that brand of aid which comes under the general term of "advice."

"Brower's girl is coming here, Joe," Plunk said. "You tell her that everything is all right."

Her granddad is well —and they will bring him home right away. He was just creased, tell her. She'll have him safe in her arms—before very long. That's all I could tell her myself."

He did not wait for the barkeep's reactions or objections. Instead, he slipped out by a back door into a corral in rear of the cantina.

The laughter of the woman and the old solo player drifted out to him and entered into his blood and coursed through him.

CHAPTER XV

"WHERE'S YOUR BANJO, PLUNK?"

PLUNK did not stop in the corral behind the cantina. He wanted to get as far away from that scene as possible. Some old stock horses drifted toward him, as horses will. But now they were as abhorrent in his sight as were human beings. He had loved horses, but how he hated the sight of them now! He had loved them as much as he had loved men, but both were to be avoided from now on.

He skirted the backs of the shacks—the U. J. Mine offices, the shooting gallery, the chowcart, and then the Rex Hotel. Beyond in a sandy portion of the town, there was a long shack of bunk rooms. One of these rooms had been rented to Plunk, ever since he was a little shaver, when he came to Mule Town an orphan.

The proprietor of the establishment had gone on Sheriff Hornuff's posse. His wife was here now to meet the returned star boarder.

He wanted to get into his room without any exchange of witticisms with the great rawboned lady who was in charge. But it was unfortunately necessary to see her first in order to get the key.

She had pretended off and on to be a sort of

mother to Plunk. It was not a very specific role. The waitress at the chowcart, the proprietress of the Last Chance Cantina, and the sheriff's wife had enjoyed the same capacity. I might say that every woman in Mule Town was a mother to Plunk and every girl was a sister.

But this lady in question, who had the soul of a landlady, was changeable in her relationships. She was a mother one day and a landlady the next. On this occasion, it is hardly necessary to state, she assumed the latter dignity.

"My husband he says that this bein' the good season for rentin' rooms—"

Why go through it all? Suffice it to say that her husband Bill had stipulated that they were losing good transients at a dollar a head, keeping that bunk room locked up for Plunk's periodic returns from the desert. She explained it all in a voice that was very sweet for so gigantic and bony a personage.

"And Bill he put your trunk outside with your effects."

The rawhide-bound trunk, and a bag of this and that, was to be found on the rear gallery, under the puncheon floor, where the empty tin cans were piled.

In his walk through the back corrals of those shacks Plunk had, very much against his better judgment, decided to tell his landlady what had happened. She was a gossip woman, and if she were on his side she might, with her well per-

fect art of insinuating ideas into the minds of her neighbors, work up a propaganda in his favor.

He would begin by saying he must get a new saddlehorse; his other horse, he would say, was a trick horse given to him by a bandit. It had gone mad. “Same as a dog going mad,” he would explain. It was a trick of the bandit’s to get even with him. Perhaps she would believe. It had thrown him at the very point — *et cetera*. All this was at his tongue’s end; it sounded so reasonable — if one only wanted to believe.

But he did not tell her. In fact, he scarcely spoke a word to her when she made that speech in her most dulcet tones. They were the same dulcet tones she used in telling Mexicans they could get lodgings across the street where they belonged.

He slung the rawhide trunk over his back and the bag of nondescript effects under his arm. Then he went on — always passing through those back corrals — toward the sutler’s shack. The sutler, who had second rate broncs, mules and burros for sale, as well as the outfitting materials of a general store, was a good business man, and would outfit him without asking questions. He had outfitted Mexicans, Americans, or even refugees from justice, in the same bland, congenial, lick-spittle manner.

Plunk stopped in the rear of the sutler’s shack to examine his trunk and find out just what would

be necessary for his trip to the desert. It would be a long trip this time, and he must discard everything so that he could travel light.

He opened the trunk. There were odds and ends which he had not dispensed with since boyhood. Tops, a toy gun, a bow and arrows. There was a pile of sheet music—cheap bulk stuff—that he had collected from time to time from drummers. He didn't look at the names to see which he would throw away and which he would keep. The name of the very first one—a Southern melody—evoked the scene of his triumphant nights in Mule Town cantinas. He never wanted to sing *that* song again. He threw them all in a pile and set fire to them. "Wait for the Wagon," "Nelly Bly," "Uncle Ned," "Old Cabin Home"—they all expired in a blazing glory.

Now some children saw that fire, which of course was nothing unusual. But a flame will attract children as it does moths. A few ragged boys and a girl in pigtails came to see what this tramp was doing.

"'Taint a tramp—it's Plunk! "

A little boy with a rat's nest of a head looked incredulously and with fear at this scarecrow. The latter was sitting on the rawhide box, tearing up sheets of red and yellow music covers. The urchin stared at him for a moment, and then his grimy face lit up and he ran to Plunk's knees.

"Sure it's Plunk! " the others cried. "Where's your banjo, Plunk? How come you're burnin' up

them songs, Plunk?"

The girl with pigtails chimed in: "Will you sing a song for us, Plunk—just one? I'll run over to the lodgin' and git your banjo."

"My banjo isn't there," Plunk said.

"Then where's it at? I'll run and git it," the girl said.

"It's in the desert."

"How come?"

"I left it there."

"Will you bring it back next time—so's to sing for me and my kid sister?" said a tall ragamuffin with a straw bonnet which must have been worn once by a mule, judging from the two holes in it where the ears go.

"Will you bring it back, Plunk?" the kid sister asked eagerly.

"Will you ever sing for us—maybe just with a harmonicky, which I've got one down the street at home?"

"Then ain't you ever goin' to sing for me—and the kid here, Plunk?"

"Yes—I'll sing again some time—" Plunk began irresolutely.

"I don't mean for the cantina—and them!" the girl snorted.

"Neither do I," said Plunk. "I mean—maybe just for you kids right here—some time."

The children watched him walk off toward the sutler's shack.

"He don't feel well to-day," said one.

"He's mad."

"He ain't mad! He was smilin' at me," said the pigtail girl.

"He was all tore up—like he'd been in a fight," said one.

This was received eagerly as the truth.

"Sure—in a fight with a b'ar!" cried a boy. "I seen his hand. It was all bloody. The b'ar had clawed his shirt to pieces and et his fingers off."

"Sure I seen his fingers was all chawed off!" another agreed.

"And *you* axed him for to play the banjo!" one of them accused the girl. "How-all do you expect a man to play a banjo when his fingers is all et up by a b'ar?"

The boy with the rat's nest hair objected: "Well, Plunk—I'll bet *he* could do it!"

CHAPTER XVI

ROCK BOTTOM

HAVING outfitted himself at the sutler's for a long desert journey, Reverdy came suddenly to the realization that he had eaten nothing for many hours. Perhaps it was the mere contemplation of that burro, that saddlehorse, that pack, which brought the visions of desert hardships to him. At any rate, he felt all gone in the stomach.

"Can you fix me up a breakfast?" he asked the sutler.

The latter stared out of fishy blue eyes. What was the trouble with the chowcart, with the Rex Hotel dining room, with the Eagle Restaurant? Then one of the fishy eyes narrowed cannily.

"I understand, pard," he said. "Sure we'll fix you up."

He ordered his wife to cook ham and eggs and flapjacks.

While the guest was waiting the sutler went into his general store, talked with a customer or two, then returned suddenly.

"Look here, Plunk, they been lookin' for you up and down the street. Brower's gal, she's lookin' for you!"

He was still canny, this sutler who outfitted renegades and fugitives for desert travel. "Shall I tell 'em you're in here?"

Plunk shook his head. "She knows all that is necessary concerning her granddad. He'll be back safe. I've told 'em all to be sure that she knows that."

The lady of the house said that breakfast was ready.

"But look here, Plunk," said the sutler, "if you eat in there in the kitchen, you kin be seen."

"All right, put me somewhere so's I can eat in peace," said Plunk.

The other thought for a while, his fishy eyes trying to take on a semblance of human expression.

"Of course, they's the shack out there where my two breeds eat. My stable mozos —"

"That suits."

"It's where I generally stick a man who's aim-in' to git out of town — and don't want the sheriff to know where he's at."

"No matter about that either," said the other.

They went into the back corral; thence to a chow shack, where the two mozos had left the tin plates of their breakfast as yet unwashed. They were not there now, but myriads of horseflies represented them.

Plunk ate his flapjacks and bacon. It was, he fervently hoped, his last breakfast in that town. Furthermore, he prayed that he would be allowed

to eat it alone. Then he would be off for the desert trail again. He estimated he would reach it by nightfall.

How soothing the desert would be then. The stars would be out! He would be alone with them. This thought was balm to him. Alone on a starlit trail! He ate with zest.

But he was not to be left alone now. Something far more pestiferous than those horseflies banging their heads against cobwebbed panes, was to be present at that farewell meal.

Someone entered.

He looked up at a buzzard-eyed woman with a thousand deep wrinkles on her swarthy face, with ears and scrawny neck, and talon-like hands heavily laden with Hopi jewelry.

How in the name of Heaven had *she* ferreted him out! The kids had probably told her. The old witch always had a troop of them trailing along.

She presented herself.

"How you have fallen from the seat of the mighty, Plunk Reverdy!" Her gray head shook until the silver and Mexican onyx clicked. "To find you here where the sutler hides horse thieves on their journey to the horizon!"

"For hell's sake, get out!" Plunk moaned. He was about to throw his cup of coffee at her. Men had been known to do that to Augustina the palmist.

"This is the revenge of Tarante the bandit!"

she announced. "What a consummation!"

The other went on eating, ruminating, chewing at tough flapjacks and soggy bacon. His mind was ruminating also. "Revenge—consummation—"

"Tarante the dead must rejoice even in the fires!"

Reverdy looked up.

He stopped masticating.

"What's that you say? Tarante—rejoicing—"

"The furies have driven you into this shack to beat your head against life—as these blow flies beating against webs."

He got up, reached across the table and grasped the withered hand.

"Look here, you old witch! If you think that, then *you're* the one that will believe in me!"

She laughed. Yes, she believed always in the worst of men's passions, or weaknesses. She was reviled by many men.

When she spoke the wisdom that was written in the stars—the wisdom that she alone could read—men threw coffee at her.

"No one will believe in you, Plunk Reverdy. Not even your woman—who loved you!"

"A woman loved *me!*" the man laughed. "Hell of a chance I've got for any woman to ever love me!"

"A woman loved you when you went out into the desert. I saw her that night. I watched her

face--while all of Mule Town listened to your serenading. You were serenading *her*—while you sat on a gaming table in a barroom, and she sat in the vestibule of the hotel! Will *she* believe you?" A parrot-like squawk of laughter ensued. "The first to revile cowardice is the coward's mate!"

"Good God! Don't mention her!" Plunk cried in torture, and then rage came to him. "If you mention her, I'll choke you for the spiteful old bat you are!"

Augustina recoiled. She realized, by the murderous fire in the youth's eyes, that it would be wise to get out.

But when she reached the door she paused. Her ear had caught the rhythm of horses' hoofbeats afar off. She stood there, an aged, buzzard-eyed thing in Spanish serape and painted jewelry—a terrific clash of color in that gray, dim, fly-infested shack.

Reverdy also heard the clatter of horses coming down the main street of the town. A hue and cry greeted them.

Of course, it was the posse returned from the desert, with the sheriff, old Brower, and his aunt.

But what did Plunk Reverdy care for that home-coming? What could it mean to *him*? He sat there indifferent, left out.

The palmist swept to the window with a jingle of jewelry, a swish of skirts, a flip of the crimson shawl that licked her narrow old shoulders

like a flame. She peered through the cobwebbed window—a seeress peering into a strange and magic scene through a crystal.

“There is the old man come back!” she announced, oracularly. “The old man you took out! See how the townsfolk flock about him! See the miners, the squaws, the cowmen, the children, the dogs! All of them coming from shacks and barrooms and stables—like a mob in the last act of an opera! And the heroine is there, too.”

“The what?”

“The heroine. Nell Brower is greeting her grandfather—and the womenfolk are helping the aged crone, his aunt, down from her horse! Every one is there, excepting you, Plunk Reverdy! Look at this climax to your play!”

But Plunk Reverdy did not rise. He sat with his gaze fixed on the table. Some coffee had been spilled on the unpainted board, and he made designs with it by means of a spoon held listlessly in his bruised right hand.

He looked at his knuckles which had split with that magnificent blow he had delivered the Mexican in the cantina a short while before. The split skin was healing over, stopping that temporary outlet to his pent-up emotions.

To carry on the figure—the festering had started. Augustina was the irritating agent.

“Now the heroine of the play throws her arms about the old man!” the palmist was croaking. “Now she throws her arms about the sheriff, like-

wise, for bringing her grandfather safely home! You should be there, Plunk Reverdy, with her arms about *your* youthful neck! ”

“For God’s sake—get out!” he begged. “Don’t rub it in! Here’s a dollar. That’s what you’re working for! Take it before I throw you out.”

“Don’t throw me out,” she said almost teasingly. “The whole town is out there—and they’ll see you tussling with a wrinkled old hag! *That* would be a little side-play to amuse the audience! Ha, ha, ha—hoowah!”

Plunk stopped his ears with his fists. He stopped them against her—and against the loud, excited talking of the mob in the street.

She watched eagerly. The horseflies, leaving the vicinity of the window, buzzed about the remains of the breakfast in front of Reverdy.

“Now then—” she was saying, “old Brower is making a speech! They are silent. He is brandishing his fist. The posse is tired. They are like white ghosts because of alkali dust. No, they are like graven images. They are angry, hot, maddened with thirst—”

Plunk only heard a word or two of what she said now.

“Images hewn out of desert quartz! How beautiful the girl is. The horses are drinking their fill. The desert men are drinking deeply and wiping the alkali from their faces. What grim, hideous faces they are!”

Plunk could not help hearing a din outside there.

"Old Brower is whipping them on with his words!" Augustina declared. "What can he be saying? He is showing them his wounded arm. They have taken the old aunt into a hotel."

Plunk could hear a man running across the little corral from the general store.

The door banged open.

The sutler stood there, his fishy eyes popping, his mouth gasping, his fat chest heaving.

"Look here, Plunk!" he cried. "You better get out of here."

Plunk laughed. "I know what's happening. Think they'll chase me from town, do they? Oh no! I've had enough of this! From now on I'll fight. I'll kill the rat!"

The huge fat sutler was hysterical.

"Plunk?" he cried. "I tell you to get out. Old Brower is tellin' 'em all about it! They know it all—but he's makin' it worse. Just showin' himself is like wavin' a red flag in their eyes. And not a man of that posse but what is sot on lynchin' you! Sheriff can't do nothin'. He's coolin' 'em off."

"I'll stay in the game," Plunk said. "I'll stay right here in this shack. The first man that comes to that door gets a slug."

Augustina's eyes burned. She was overjoyed. But she was also frightened. The flame of the shawl wrapped itself about her writhing, swarthy

shoulders. She cast on Reverdy one final scorching melodramatic leer, and then slipped out.

"I cain't afford to have my place all shot up, Plunk," the sutler begged. "You know that! And I cain't afford to buck no locoed mob."

Plunk leaped up—and the sutler cringed. It was like a lobo leaping toward the throat of a cow.

"You mean—you *too* are telling me to get out!"

"Oh, no, Plunk," the other begged. "I ain't askin' you nothin'. Stay here. But keep under cover!"

"Under cover—when Augustina knows where I am?" Plunk laughed. "She'll invite them all to come here and finish this damned business which she calls a play!" Reverdy flopped back in his chair, rolled a cigarette, chuckled, inhaled.

"Augustina!" the sutler was murmuring miserably. "Good God, they's no tellin' what that ol' she-buzzard will do!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRIESTESS OF SATAN

NO, there was no telling what old Augustina would do. No psychologist in the world could ever untangle that web of suppressed desires—which was her soul. Her greatest and most enslaving impulse was to get a dollar for reading a palm—or to beg or steal the coin.

The next activity dear to her heart was to tell lies; then to make trouble; then to make a match between a good man and a bad woman, or a bad man and a good woman. Romance and avarice and trickery were her gods.

And yet her palmistry was not entirely a pose to facilitate tricking money from inebriated miners. She believed in her art. She believed that she was a priestess of Satan.

That is why the present “drama” as she called it, was so absorbing. She plainly saw the forces of hell beleaguering a once care-free and beloved youth.

Tarante, the bandit, was in the fires, but he was working a terrible revenge. And Augustina resolved—as usual—to align herself with the devil. She must help consummate that revenge.

Here was a mob in the street wanting to know

where Plunk Reverdy was hiding. Augustina could lead them to their victim.

But something gave her pause: Why put an end to that revenge now? A lynching mob, a lariat, a dead pine tree—these were too ordinary, too human. The victim of the dead Tarante would thus find merely the perfect solace of death.

No, that must not be. It was too soon for that. The dead Tarante—laughing at the magnificent practical jest he had contrived—would only be foiled.

The victim must suffer one more hour of torment first. And it was the task of Augustina, the shrewdest and most cruel of all women, to find the way.

She mingled in the mob, yes. But she told the old grandfather that Plunk Reverdy was hiding in one of the booths of a certain cantina, putting them thus off the track for a short space of time.

Nell Brower was clinging to her grandfather's arm. Her grandfather was weak, exhausted, just recovering from the crease in his arm. And here he was working himself up into a frenzy of rage over Plunk Reverdy.

The girl was pleading with him, crying, begging him to come to the hotel. "Forget about Reverdy!" she said. "Everything has turned out all right! You're ill—and out of your head!"

The posse to whom he had been describing the homeward journey and the perfidy of Plunk Rev-

erdy, had already turned down the street at the head of a mob of boys and men.

"Let me go!" Brower said to his granddaughter. "I'll see you in a little while, child. But let me go. This must be done first!"

Augustina the palmist plucked Nell Brower by the sleeve.

She had use for the girl. This was the agent of torture that Augustina, priestess of the devil, had singled out. Nell was the girl who had chosen that hapless youth as her hero. She had sent him into the desert to protect her grandfather.

And now while the youth was in hiding in a miserable shack—where the sutler in the past had hidden Mexican horse thieves—now was the time Nell Brower must see him! A few moments with the "heroine" and the fallen "hero" brought face to face—that would be a torture far beyond Tarante's fondest dreams!

Brower had broken away from his importunate granddaughter and was hurrying after the mob.

The girl turned to Augustina, recoiling.

"Never mind those blind fools!" Augustina whispered, her cold breath reaching the girl's cheek. "Your coward-lover is not where I told them. Come with me. I will show you—so you may torture him!"

Why it was that Nell followed the palmist will soon appear.

I can only set down the events of this chronicle

as they happened. It is beyond me to analyze the inner conflicts—such as the emotions that must have possessed that girl; particularly, when she saw Reverdy.

There he was, tilted against the board wall. A flabbergasted expression on his unshaven face; his limbs scrawny enough because of his recent trials in the desert; his clothes not fit to adorn a Papago rustler. He looked like a scarecrow taken down from its stake in the cornfield, thrown into a box-stall and forgotten.

Nell Brower gasped. "*You poor man!*"

He pulled himself together, brushed his mouth nervously and got up. His tall peaked hat was on the back of his head; it was one case in a thousand when the chivalrous minstrel forgot to remove it. Why remove it? Should he bare his head and stand there repentant, to be flayed again?

He shuffled for a moment, abashed, as she looked at him from his alkali covered sombrero to his torn ragged boots. Under her gaze his face heated. How she must have pitied him!

No, he could not stand for another flaying. He had come to this outcast's shack to avoid her. It was the rock bottom. He could go no further down. He turned, and his pride burned up with a consuming fire.

"What do you want of me, ma'am?"

She shook her head as if she could not believe what she heard, nor could she believe what she saw.

She saw the natural outward destruction which a few days in the desert without food or horse can do to a man. But she confused this with what had happened to Reverdy's inner self. It looked as if he—of his own act—had done something which had turned him from a jolly, good-looking youth, to a renegade. Years of shame seemed to have fallen upon him.

"What has happened to you?" she burst out suddenly. "It can't be true!"

"I guess you've heard all that, ma'am. What good will it do to try to make fool excuses." He turned on her angrily. "Especially to you."

His look was eloquent enough—as if ordering her to get out.

She stood firmly. "I have a right here. It was my own granddad—I put him in your care."

"Yes, that's just it! You're the last one in the world who would believe me. Your own granddad was the one to suffer. You asked me to take care of him. I didn't make good."

He seemed to want to brush past her and get away. But she stood in his path.

"You can't go out!" she said. "They're looking for you—the whole town. Granddad has been working them into madness. There's no telling what they'll do to you."

His mouth gaped. The moisture on his chin and forehead turned cold and he wiped it. "You mean, ma'am—that you don't want them to take me?"

Augustina — whose head was just beyond the girl's shoulder peering in the partly opened door — gaped likewise. She had brought the girl here to flay her perfidious lover. But now what was happening!

"I wish you would tell me," the girl said excitedly, "what you have done, that you deserve to be lynched!" A picture of him — the idol of the Rex Cantina that night, playing his rollicking songs, came back to her. It must have been evoked by a light in his eye — that had just been kindled.

But he smiled bitterly.

"I'm not going to stand here before you, and be called a liar. And that's what's happened when I've told my story to everyone else."

Her face clouded. And he thought she seemed to wince as if holding back tears. Behind her was that devilish old crone — a face wrinkled and yellow, a shocking contrast, not only because it was so hideous, but because it was laughing.

Reverdy saw red again.

"Look here," he burst out, "I'll tell you the story, and you can laugh — the same as that evil old bird out there! I'll never ask a human being in the rotten world to believe me again. You're the last one who could believe, but you're going to hear it!" He raised his voice passionately: "I was bucked off a horse! There's the first thing you'll call a lie. Everyone's seen me ride broncos in our round-ups — man-killing broncos. But this

was a gentle old work horse. *And he bucked me off!* ”

The cackling of the witch vibrated across the girl's shoulder, making it writhe.

“And let me tell you, ma'am!” Reverdy said harshly, bitterly, “it was powerfully convenient—being bucked off and tucked away unconscious in the chaparral until the gun shooting was all over!”

The girl's large eyes had welled. She bit her lip. She put out her hand—as if Reverdy were striking her.

“I didn't hear the shooting,” he laughed. “All I was in time for was the groaning. Convenient? Of course it was convenient! They all say that. They'll say it for the rest of my days in this hell here under the stars! I got bucked off for the first time in my life—and in the nick of time!

“They've all called me a liar: the sheriff and his posse; and every one in town down to the measliest breed in the streets. And now you're here to listen to the same crazy alibi—which is the only alibi I can think up. I'm plumb crazy to think I'd ever find any one in God's world to believe me!”

“You have found one!” the girl said. Her big sad eyes had brimmed over now. The tears went down her white cheeks to the corners of her mouth, down to those three freckles on her chin. “You have found one. *I believe you!*”

Augustina, the palmist, let out a cry like a crow

that has been cheated of a good meal. What had happened? Had the fires of hell burned out? Had Tarante failed? Had all the laws of romance and life been broken?

Augustina had been confident that of all the people in Mule Town this girl would despise the victim most. Instead she turned out to be the only one to believe in him!

Augustina had counted on love to make her despise him; but she had forgotten that love would not accept circumstantial evidence that satisfied the rest of the world.

The old crone lifted her voice; she lifted her scrawny hands and her crimson serape fluttered about her—as if she were a witch burned at the stake, screaming.

“He’s here! He’s here—the man you all want!” she cried. “Come here and take him! The laws of the dead have decreed that he be destroyed! Yes, even the laws of the dead—which this girl has defied!”

Her cry stirred up a greater hubbub in the street.

The mob came.

CHAPTER XVIII

TWISTED WIRE

REVERDY put his hands upon the girl's shoulders. He pressed her aside so that he could go out first to meet the gang.

Nell threw her arms about him. "They'll lynch you!" she cried. "You know that! Don't go out there to die! Let me go first. Let me get to my grandfather! He's the one who started this."

Reverdy spoke to her quickly as the men were thumping past the general store.

"Before you came, girl," he said, "I was going out there to fight; to shoot down as many of them as stood up before me; to keep on firing until I dropped! But that's changed now. You've changed it all. I want to live!"

"Then let me go—you stay here!" she begged. "Let me beg them to free you—"

"Oh, no! I myself am the one to do that. I'll ask for a chance to say one thing more!"

Events happened then in a whirlwind of action. Not two men could have described it in the same way. Not a single man could have told what each of the leading characters did.

There were many who played their parts; the

posse goaded into a frenzy of anger by old Brower's complaints during the long hot ride from the desert; there was old Brower himself, a ghastly looking figure with his arm in a sling; there was the sheriff, shouting himself hoarse, swearing oaths, threatening the crowd with his gun, in a futile attempt to disperse them.

There was the fat and hysterical Mrs. Pikey on the gallery of the Rex Hotel with a jury of women whom she had enraged with her own deft version of the desert raid. There was the girl, who followed Reverdy and rushed into the arms of her grandfather; there was a man lighting a fire; there was another with an old rake handle and some twisted wire.

And there was Plunk Reverdy himself—tall, ragged, unshaven; composed now with a strangely triumphant calm.

Those who had seen him when he came from the desert had seen a Plunk Reverdy that they had never known. Any breed of horse thief slinking through the street on an old mule would have held his head as high as this broken man.

But here again—with the light beating down upon him fiercely—as if centering upon him and leaving all that grim mob in shadow—here they saw the old-time Plunk whom they had known, whom they had sung with, to whose music they had danced.

Ragged clothes, a torn, sunburned skin, an unshaven face did not make much of a disguise in

Mule Town. There he was, the same Plunk they had loved.

But no one knew it — save only the very closest who could see his eyes.

“Don’t listen to him!” the veterinary shouted. “We’ve heard it all before!”

“What good are excuses — and excuses! What good are lies!” cried another of the posse. “Ole Brower — he’s told us the truth!”

“Light the fire there, Soggy! And we’ll git this started!”

“What-all are you men going to do!” the sheriff cried at the top of his lungs. “This gang busts up right here — or I’ll lock you all up in the hoose-gow!”

The ridiculousness of this threat might have started them laughing — under other conditions. But it was no time for laughing now.

“If any man here thinks he kin start a lynchin’ — I’ll plug him!” Sheriff Hornuff cried out.

“We ain’t goin’ to lynch him!” shouted a bar-keep.

“No, we promise you that, sheriff. Only you stay out!” said an old rancher.

“Lynchin’s far too good for him!” cried old Brower. “Brandin’ — that’s what he gits!”

The girl’s cries were drowned out. The sheriff found himself, gun in hand, surrounded by many men. He felt like emptying his revolver into the hot flesh all about him. But he knew well enough that that was no way to stop the racket.

For a brief moment Reverdy's voice rang out.

"I'm going to say one thing, men: I'm going to square myself. I didn't want to a little while ago. But I've found one person who believes in me. It's made me want you all to believe—"

"Oh, yes, we'll believe all righto!" they scoffed.

"Got the wire ready, Bleak-top?" others called.

"Tear his shirt off."

"Don't let him draw. If he draws—everybody kin shoot!"

It was old Brower—the mob leader—who dispensed this privilege.

"If he draws—you better duck—or he'll kill six of you in the blink of an eye!" the sheriff cautioned.

This seemed to quiet the bedlam; at least for a moment.

"What I wanted to tell you, men, is only this: You all think I lied about a horse. All right! wait till I show you that horse—"

"Yes, show us! Give him a chance to show us a gentle stock hoss buck him off—*him* the best bronco peeler in Arizony!"

Everybody knew that he had ridden into town on a mule.

"Gents!" he cried out. "All I want is a chance to find that horse—and bring him to you—"

"Oh, yes! You want a chance to ride out to the desert agin! Haw! haw! That's a good one!"

"That horse will do his stuff again!" Plunk called out. "That bandit I killed knew that he'd do it every once in a while. That's why he gave him to me. If I bring him back—"

"How'll you bring him back—without you go to the desert to find him?" one man asked pointedly.

"That's where I'm going!" cried Plunk.

This was the touch of humor they all appreciated. They guffawed and then shouted. "Oh, yes, you're goin' to the desert all righto. And you'd ride back to us agin—eh? A lot of chanst for that! If we just let you go! When you go you'll have the word 'Yaller' burned on your hide!"

"Bend that wire into a Y!" Brower called out.

"And run it on his left gaskin—same's a beef!"

"Then let him go to the desert—and stay there!"

"If he's goin' out to the desert—then run a road brand onto him!"

"Make a fish-hook out of that thar wire, Bleak-top, and put the Y inside same!"

"Fire's ready!"

"Come on, Delgado—the lass-rope!"

The shouts were taken up by all throats. Nell Brower screamed. And other women screamed, too—such as could see the gang of men in the little corral.

A lariat spun down out of the air. A fancy roper—a Mexican whose name was famous in Mule Town rodeos, was spinning his line. It came down against the shack; whipped out. Plunk Reverdy drew his six-gun, ducked, raised his hand. His left arm shot high up in the air, to ward off the black coil.

But no man in the world could escape a noose like that. The shack was behind him, a crowd of men in front. The catch was thrown long and clean with a small loop. It hummed, and shrank to a little circle with one flap, catching the arms taut.

A dozen men helped the thrower yank the other end. Reverdy was dragged to the sand. They jumped on his arm, and wrenched his gun away.

The crowd parted. And as they dragged their victim through the rattle weed, old Brower followed. And Nell Brower—the only woman in the corral—followed likewise, her face like alabaster marble.

And why not? Did she not have a right? It was *her* trust that this coward had betrayed. A good many of the men thought that she was on their side. *All* women should be on their side! It was a moral problem. And in moral problems women are cruelest, the most unforgiving.

Look at Mrs. Pikey up there on the gallery of the hotel. Look at the women folk with her. Let them see! Let this girl see! Let all the

boys see! Let all the children see what should happen to a deputy that turns yellow!

Mule Town and its honor and its civilization were at stake. Should they countenance one of their citizens saving himself before saving the weak? Or should they mark him forever as an outcast of society?

The little fire of barrel staves and mesquite roots sent up a smoky flame. The wire turned red—then white.

The girl followed even up to the fire. No one noticed her now. They were all intent upon that flame—and that twisted wire—and that man.

She wanted to cry out to them to give him the one little chance he had asked for. But she knew how futile her cry would be. She knew how pitiful his last appeal was.

But if God in heaven and that mob would not grant this man's simple desperate appeal—she at least would.

In the crush of that circle of men around the flame she was noticed no more than some of the smaller boys. She slipped her hand to the hip of one of the posse and slid out the six-gun.

Two or three men were kneeling on the sand beside their roped prisoner.

One of them had a wire already poised. His hand trembled; his face was screwed with determination—but it was as if he were swallowing a bitter drink. That fellow had run an iron on many a picked calf, but this experience was new to him. He didn't relish it.

He was excited; as was everyone else. In that fraction of a moment neither he nor a single man in that sand lot knew what was happening.

The girl, for instance, fell to her knees in the sand. She might have fainted, for all they knew. But she was insignificant.

It was only old Brower who noticed her. He knew that his granddaughter was in a place where she did not belong. Perhaps she had fainted. He put his hand under her arm, telling her to come away.

She came away, lifted partly by the excited old man.

But meanwhile Plunk Reverdy found that one of his bound hands held a six-gun.

It was a gun with a slender stock—just the thing for a long-thumbbed, artistic and lightning hand.

CHAPTER XIX

DELIVERANCE

THE thoughts of each man in that scene would fill a chapter—a book. How quickly the scene dissolved—like a hill of ants finding a pebble dropped out of the sky into their midst! The brain of every witness there, save one, was in a mad whirl.

That one was Reverdy, who understood all, whose purpose was the most clearly defined. He was to be branded for something he did not deserve. He would fight to the death. Any man would. If he did not fight he would have been the coward they took him for.

A shot, like the crack of a whip, seemed muffled, remote, even though it came from the center of the gang.

Delgado, fancy roper from Mexico, was standing above Reverdy. A moment before he had been twisting the knots about the latter's wrists till the rawhide cut the flesh. Reverdy had thrust his bound hands far to one side, bringing the muzzle of his gun athwart his waist.

Delgado alone knew where that shot had come from. A flame seemed to leap from the prisoner's hip. Delgado fell with a groan.

Another shot.

The man with the white hot wire jumped to his feet with an incoherent cry, then sagged at the knees.

A ring of men widened precisely as that lass-rope had swung into a big loop with a single flip.

The victim of the mob stood up, bared to the waist, his hands tied behind him, a faint white mist coming from his back. Only a few of that gang knew that he was armed—and they stampeded.

At his feet were the two wounded men. At his side was Sheriff Hornuff, gun in hand. A good many thought that the sheriff had played a master stroke of his own. And yet the men in the crowd who were armed were the sheriff's own men, and they were by no means disposed in that fleeting instant of panic to shoot him down.

It could not have been for more than three seconds that Reverdy stood there—like a savage and dangerous beast loosed suddenly from its bounds. His eyes were so bright, so fierce, so burning that each man had the impression that Plunk was looking at him, challenging him to a gun duel.

The sheriff whispered then, as he sliced the riata with his bowie knife:

“Go on, Plunk! Get your hoss and vamose!”

In two leaps Reverdy cleared the corral and, running close to the ground—a gray streak like a fleeing sage rabbit—he reached the horse and vaulted aboard.

"For God's sake, chief," some one screamed in the deathlike silence, "are you leavin' him escape? It was him that plugged me. Do you get that — *he plugged me* — the murderous rat! "

It was the man who had dropped the white hot wire. He staggered toward the fugitive, holding a limp arm.

Delgado, the fancy roper, was groaning. "You lynch him, you hombres! Lynch him, for the love of God — killer that he is! Don't you hombres let him go now! Don't stare and gape! We can lynch him now — for a killer! No brandin' — lynchin', so help me God! "

These cries from the wounded men broke the spell. There was a wild rush into the corral again. Deputies drew. Flashes darted from the milling herd.

The slugs whistled past Reverdy's bare shoulders; across the neck of his horse; past the rider's ears. He crouched low over the withers of his mount.

A moment more and the desert trail harbored him.

One figure in the street watched the retreating horseman with a peculiar mixture of chagrin and triumph.

Augustina, the palmist, saw that the victim of Tarante's revenge had escaped the fury of a Mule Town mob. But what is the fury of a group of living mortals compared to the fury of the dead!

"He is gone in search of Tarante's horse, has he?" she cackled, rubbing her horny dark hands. "Well and good. He has escaped us. But will he escape the wrath of the dead?"

Some listened to her; others did not. Mexicans and breeds attached great import to her theatrical sentences; children found her unkempt iron-gray hair and her buzzard's eyes fascinating. No one else paid attention.

But there she stood, her eyes piercing against the sunlight toward the horizon of mesas where Plunk Reverdy was riding.

"In search of a horse, eh? I have heard of horses that led their pursuers into Soda Mesa to die of thirst. I have heard of Papago witch doctors transforming themselves into horses and leading men to destruction—yes, to the nearest we have of hell on this earth—which is thirst in Soda Mesa Desert!"

Again she rubbed her hands and hobbled off toward her palmist's booth in the Rex cantina.

"So! He will follow Tarante's horse across the horizon! Well, we shall see where that trail will lead him!" She went cackling along, her old crimson garments the one violent touch of color in the drab street, her voice the one discord.

What cared she whether the town believed her? It was enough that she herself believed, in her soul, *Tarante had only started to wreak his revenge!*

CHAPTER XX

THE STAR-FACED HORSE

AS the days and weeks went by, as prospectors came and went, as herds were shipped to the Santa Fe Spur, as shipments of ingots were sent north from the U. J. mine, as rodeos were held—the Reverdy incident grew dim.

But the memory of that grim and tragic youth was evoked two months later when Sheriff Hornuff came home from an expedition across the Soda Mesa Desert.

This expedition of his had the same purpose as the fatal one which had gone out under the guidance of Plunk Reverdy. That is to say, it was to transport old Jackson Brower and his household to the claim on the southwest of Soda Mesa.

Whereas Plunk had failed, Sheriff Hornuff succeeded. He came back with the news that his charges had arrived safely at their destination. Thus he sought out Nell Brower to give her the good tidings concerning her grandfather—and likewise to give her tidings concerning some one else.

Nell Brower was not to be found in Mule Town. She had retreated to Eagle Feather Cañon, where she boarded at a cow ranch and pur-

sued her chosen calling—her missionary work among the Navahos of that region.

He met her late one night in the sitting room of the Tumbling Deuce Ranch. He sat, with a sombrero in rugged hands, his damp scraggly hair brushed away from a deeply corrugated forehead, his lips drawing nervously at a black cigar.

On the edge of a chair of blistered varnish and warped wood sat the girl, nervous and expectant.

She listened, overjoyed about the news of her grandfather.

“And now—” she began.

“Yes, you want to hear of *him*,” the sheriff nodded.

“You’ve seen Plunk!” she exclaimed.

“No—but from this mucker and that I’ve heard tell of him.”

He puffed for a moment thoughtfully, as if not knowing how to begin. The tale he had to tell must not be spoiled by careless exposition. It was a drama—and the sheriff knew that no drama in the world had an audience so exacting, so intent, so vitally absorbed in its outcome as the heroine herself.

“You remember when them daft jackasses was goin’ to brand him he swore he’d prove his alibi if they let him find that trick hoss? Well, that’s what he’s been trying to do ever since he escaped the mob.

“He chased down there to the desert just like

a kid with one thing in his mind—to get that hoss. Picked up some tracks and follered 'em to the heart of the Bad Lands without figurin' on how much water he had. It didn't matter—so long as he could get that hoss. He was just about dead of thirst when they found him.”

He caught the girl's eye. Her hand had gone to her throat. He knew she felt that thirst like a mother feeling the pain of a loved child.

“No—don't get worked up about that. I reckon that kid could stand thirst burning him up. It waren't half as bad as somethin' else that was torturin' him.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “Tell me the end first, chief, if you have any feeling. Is he safe?”

“Wall, so fur as I know—”

“And the horse—”

“Yes—it's all about that hoss. The whole life of a young man is sort of hangin' on the character of a ole fuzz-tail. If that hoss don't really do tricks, like Plunk said, why, then, Plunk's name is adobe mud till the day of his death! He might as well turn outlaw, which is the way he's head-in'—”

“You don't mean that *you* doubt, chief!”

“Wall,” he said uncertainly, pleadingly, “I'd admire a powerful lot to see that hoss!”

The girl flared. “If that's what you came to tell me, I won't listen. I've heard enough lies—”

The sheriff stopped her.

“Gal, when I say I want to see the hoss, I mean

I want to see him do his trick. I know hosses. Met a lot of 'em. Know 'em personally. Now, that critter waren't no outlaw or killer. He was a gentle ole critter. I know. But I'm open to convincin'. And Plunk must of figured that that hoss would do his trick again. Leave me tell you the whole story."

Again the girl sat on the edge of the chair, drinking in every word.

"Muckers came along that trail travelin' north. They all told as how they met up with a ragged-lookin' hombre with a short reddish beard and bronze color hair, which same asked them had they seen a hoss with stars on its face. And they figured he was heat-struck. And they told him — so's to git rid of him — to keep on the trail south and he'd find said hoss sooner or later. They laughed to me about this."

The sheriff was puffing violently now.

The girl's fists doubled and whitened, her nails digging into her palms.

"And there he was trailin' along south, his mind whirlin' about one central point which always makes a man daft. 'A hoss, a hoss!' he cries to every Papago squaw or Mex or fugitive rustler when he meets 'em on the trail. And all laughin'. And then a sort of miracle happens."

The sheriff puffed mildly again. He wanted to present this part of the drama deliberately.

The girl was almost breathless, her sun-burned forehead wrinkled in anxiety, expectation.

"I heard it all from a Papago gal which I clapped in the hoosegow at Cobb's Coulee for stealin' a calico dress and knifin' a cow hand. I found out she'd been chased out of a reservation for bustin' some taboo or other. Seems like her tribefolk was goin' to kill her, but she was too slick for 'em. A sort of outcast gal with her hand sot ag'in' the whole world. She wandered from this town to that, thievin', and then found it best to trail off into the desert until folks forgot her doin's. *He* found her, there, sick."

"You mean Plunk?"

The sheriff nodded. "She told me all about him. He give her his last drop of water. He give her food. He give her his burro to trail on down to Mexico. And during it all he must of unburdened his heart to her concernin' that devil hoss.

"Wall, she left him, and said that if she found a water hole she'd come back and light a fire on the mesa where they were at as a signal to him. But he said no, she'd be caught, bein' as the sheriff was snoopin' around them parts."

A sheepish grin came over his face and he pulled the grin out of shape by pluckin' at the mustache.

"Yes," he confessed, "I was snoopin'. And I found her and took her into custody."

"How did you find her?"

"That's just it! I wouldn't of found her— if she hadn't come back to light that fire."

"She came back!" the girl exclaimed. "And she found water for him!"

"No. Not water. It was somethin' else. Somethin' worth more than water—to that boy.

"When he was zigzaggin' out of the cañon northward—with no hope of pickin' up the hoss's tracks again—lo and behold, he seen her fire and he come back. And here comes the miracle.

"Somehow—maybe because she was a outcast like himself—she knew that it was mighty important for him to find that hoss. One person in a million would of figured as how water was more important. But she—bein' sick and wanderin' in her head—figured right."

He made a slight digression, dropping into the habit of philosophizing so dear to his heart:

"I'm somethin' of a reader and student of hoo-man nature myself. I've heard somewheres that certain kinds of people see the truth like a big flashin' light. And the sight comes to 'em very often after they're nigh to death. Weak people gettin' well. Sick people, epileptics— Did you never hear of St. Paul? Well, no matter.

"This Indian gal who was a thief—and cast out by her own tribe—she knew that that thar was the main thing in life for Plunk Reverdy. She seen it, she said, right after a prospector had told her she was within a few miles of a water pocket. And she rode hotfoot back to the mesa, fearin' Reverdy would get too far away without seein' her signal fire."

Sheriff Hornuff laughed now as if this character intrigued him, fascinated him, as a dramatist pleased with a heroic concept.

"What the gal had seen was this. The hoss with the stars onto his face had gone sort of wild and was leadin' a brood of mares. Plunk Reverdy found the tracks and followed 'em. He roped one of the mares, but the rest got away. Then for days he trailed 'em all along the fringe of the desert. A lot of times he caught up with 'em. He even got close enough to plug that very critter he was after. And he had to fight like hell with himself for hours to keep from doin' same. Can you imagine how he hated that hoss? "

"How I hate him, too! " the girl cried.

"Then some muckers saw the boy after he'd been trailin' that brood for days. Crazy? Wall, could a man be much else? He trailed 'em all along one horizon of Sody Mesa Desert. He kept out of the windward of that thar demon hoss, but it didn't do no good. The hoss just played with him, waited till he got close enough, then like the lightnin' he'd be off and his brood follern' him. Over lava, where there waren't no tracks left. Drop out of existence, as you might say.

"The last I heard of him he was follerin' that band south. And I doubt if he'll ever catch their leader. That hoss ain't like a ordinary wild stallion leadin' a cavy. He's as fierce, mebbe, but he's had a bit of education among hoomans.

Knows how to stay just beyond their reach. And Plunk's the one man he seems sot on stayin' clear of."

The girl appeared dazed by the tragic picture that the sheriff had evoked. She sat for a moment as if brooding—as if all the wrongs that had fallen upon Reverdy were weighing her down. The vision of Plunk wandering around in despair, searching for an old horse in the baking arroyos of the desert, was more than she could bear. She struggled; then, as if throwing off the weight, she stood up.

"I'm going!" she said. "I'm going down there to find him!"

The sheriff scratched his head; then said stupidly:

"To find who—the hoss?"

"To find Plunk Reverdy. I want to bring him home. I want to tell him—that I believed him from the first. That nothing he can do will make me believe him more. And he has proved himself to you—if you've got any sense, Sheriff Hornuff! Just one thing—like giving all his water to a sick Papago thief-girl—is enough of proof!"

"You don't mean you're goin' down to Sody Mesa Desert, gal—alone!"

"Of course I am. Not to-morrow—but to-night. And alone!"

"Wall, I'll be damned!"

He sat there pulling at his mustache and chewing at its end. What could he do to keep her from

this ridiculous act? Could he persuade her that she would not last two days in Soda Mesa Desert without some one who knew the water pockets? Could he keep her in Mule Town by force?

She was already out of the room, getting her riding gauntlets, her sombrero, her six-gun.

When he got up after thinking it all over she was in the corral saddling a pony. And after the rancher and his wife had asked what it was all about, and he had told them, he came to the following conclusion: "How can I argue her over to my side, when she's the one who's right?"

Not very long afterward Nell Brower was out on the starlit trail alone.

CHAPTER XXI

REVERDY'S PAL

PLUNK REVERDY would never have given up the chase for that horse. There is no doubt about that. But something happened which forced him to go back to Mule Town before he succeeded.

He had run down all clews. For a week he had tried to pick up the tracks where—according to a rancher—the horse had last been seen heading southward. But too much time had elapsed. The only clear tracks were in hard sand which lasted only until a windstorm came along. At the end of the week he gave up. He would have to get another grubstake and hit for the desert again.

It was while he was going back to a sutler's cabin on the desert edge that the incident happened that made it impossible for him to search any further.

In the late afternoon as he was riding slowly out of a deep gulch he met a very peculiar man.

He was a narrow shouldered wisp of a fellow with pointed features and rat's eyes. He was leading a cavy of horses.

"Holla, there, pard!" the man called to him.
"Which way are you ridin'?"

"I'm goin' to the outfitting post at Gila Sink, and then hitting for the desert again. I'm out of food and water."

"Oh, no, you ain't!" said the affable, rat-faced gentleman. "Not yet."

"I've got all the food and water you kin drink or eat. I stock up for a good long time. Now we'll just set down here in this bowlder wash, and get sociable. I never let a gentleman pass me up in the desert without I make him a bosom pal."

This was the most friendly treatment Plunk Reverdy had received from the hands of any human being since his tragedy. The fact that this stranger did not know whom he was inviting to be a "bosom pal" made Plunk smile.

"I don't reckon you'll be over-anxious to have me for a pal, stranger, when you know who I am."

That rat's eyes glittered, showing red whites. The stranger cast a furtive glance at Reverdy's hand and holster.

"What-all may you mean by that, hombre?"

Reverdy laughed. "No, I'm not a bandit," he said. "And I'm not a sheriff or marshal or a deputy. Calm yourself. And there's no reason in God's world why I should draw on you. So don't be looking so all-fired scared at my fingers."

"Then who are you that you're figurin' I'll be counted a enemy?"

"I'm Plunk Reverdy."

This did not seem to have the effect he had anticipated. Plunk went on:

"I'm every man's enemy. Because every man in the world has set himself up against me."

The other was smiling through uneven, yellow teeth.

"You look like an affable cuss," Plunk said. "But I don't expect you to stick to that invitation you just gave out. You can retract. I'll ride on. I'll say good-by—and good luck. No gun-throwing; no harsh words."

The other was still smiling. He had taken off his tall-peaked Mexican sombrero, and was scratching a mop of sticky reddish hair.

"I knew that in the first place," he said.

"Don't lie—or maybe we won't part as friendly as I said we would."

"I ain't lyin', Plunk. I know you. Didn't call you by name, because I thought you might be travelin' under another. Ain't polite to call a hombre from the desert a name which might be he's cast off. I had a brother killed makin' that mistake."

"How come you know me—when I don't know you?"

"Seen you settin' up on a gamin' table with a banjo, and all the cantina gals and muckers and gamblers sort of worshipin' you."

Plunk Reverdy flushed hot. He wiped his tongue over dry salty lips. For a moment he wanted to kill some one—and this fellow looked like one you could kill without dreaming about him at night.

"Will you have a drink—" the man was saying genially.

Plunk hated him—as he hated every man he saw. He laughed a bitter laugh at those yellow teeth, that tobacco stained chin, that nest of reddish straw which was the man's hair.

"You're askin' Plunk Reverdy to drink with you!" he laughed bitterly. "That's a good joke!"

"Why not?" the other said, dismounting from his horse. "Why not? I know all about you, Plunk. You're a good scout—in my opinion. You've got sense. That's why I'm proud to meet you—to call you a pard."

Again Plunk flushed, his forehead moistening. He tried to wet his lips, but his tongue stuck and trembled across them. He gathered his horse, and was about to swing off. The fellow must be drunk—or heat-struck talking that way. "Proud to call Plunk Reverdy a pard!" What a hideous jest!

"Look here, Plunk!" the desert rat was saying. "I know a man makes a mistake once in a while. And the world kicks him out. I know. I understand all about your case. Heard about the brandin' and all. You got out afore they run the brand onto you—din't you? Well, even if you hadn't I'd still give you my hand and call you a brother, so help me God!"

Reverdy looked down over his shoulder. The man was following him. Yes—very drunk.

That was the only explanation. No man in the world would talk that way to Plunk Reverdy now!

But Reverdy, as if fascinated at meeting such a freak, held his mount in. The horse wheeled, champed.

"Look here, Plunk!" the rat-eyed man was saying. "*They* kin judge you! But do you think I will! Oh, no. A man does things—and when he does 'em they's reasons. No man in the world has ever been able to say what-all a coward really is! Am I right?"

He was right—but Plunk could not help wondering what that had to do with him. Naturally enough the psychology of a coward had never entered into Plunk's recent tragedy at all. It had nothing to do with the matter.

"Coward — hoss — thief — killer — traitor — whatever it is, they's reasons. And who am I to judge?"

Plunk looked down in wonder. He dismounted and went to the man—a little fellow he was—scarcely reaching to the other's chin.

"Say, hombre, who the hell are you anyway, talking like this?"

"Me? Look!"

The fellow brushed back some of the sticky strands of red hair. It revealed the side of his head. Where once had been an ear, there was now only an ugly wound composed of concentric scars. He covered the hideous spot with his long

strands again, brushing them down with the palm of his root-like hand. His mouth again tightened to a grin. Then he held his hand—that same hand which had touched that spot behind his temple—out to Plunk.

“Shake, pard.”

“How did it happen, hombre?” Plunk asked.

“I guess you know. Ran a butcher shop and got my cattle mixed as the sayin’ goes. They branded me—cuttin’ off my ear. You was luckier.”

The hand was still out—friendly and hideous.

Now Plunk Reverdy was a proud man. His pride in fact had once been so great that he had disliked telling any one of killing Tarante—because he had hit Tarante in the back! And here he was being told by a cattle thief: “I’m as good as you. You’re as good as me. Come on and shake.”

Well, it will scarcely be believed, but Plunk Reverdy took that hand.

And the reason for it was this: He considered every man in the world as rotten as that cattle and horse thief. Furthermore—he considered that thief better than any man in the world, because he did not set himself above his fellow beings.

“And you’ll have a drink, pard?”

Plunk took it. Then the other took one.

They drank out of the same flask; from the same nozzle.

“To your health, pard,” Reverdy said.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HERALD-PRIEST

BUT that handshake and drink were by no means the end of Reverdy's adventure with the horse thief, Slink Bottiler.

They parted company after supper. Reverdy slept high up toward the rim of the gulch. The next morning after riding out of the gulch, crossing the mesa top and starting down on the other side, he saw the one-eared man again.

This time, however, it was a very distant view.

He looked far down into a cañon, where the sun's rays were just slanting across the floor of sage and sand. The walls of the cañon were heavily timbered. One side was still dark. The other—the western side—caught the sunlight gloriously against a red façade of quartz and granite pillars.

On the flat floor of the cañon Reverdy could see a band of horses. These, of course, commanded his sharpest gaze. His horse—the devil-horse which had caused his downfall—might be of their number.

As he wound down the steep trail toward them, he saw a man ride from the darkness of the timbered slope and give chase to the cavy.

The man swung a wide loop in his lariat, singled out a horse from the cavy, roped it and took in the slack of his lariat with dallies around the saddlehorn.

The horse was thrown. At the same instant, Reverdy, looking down from the edge of the cañon, saw a band of riders coming out of the forest of piñones and sycamore on the western slope.

They rode down in a disordered band, one raider far in the lead.

The horse thief looked up in time to drop his lariat, wheel his mount and get under way before the band surrounded him. The foremost of the riders, however, fired.

The fugitive fired back, and his shot found its mark.

The pursuer dropped from his horse and rolled to the sand. One or two of his companions dismounted and went to him while the rest gave chase. Whether the victim of the horse thief's bullet was killed or wounded, Plunk could not ascertain.

For a few moments he watched this drama with the aloofness of a human being watching the frantic efforts of some sort of insect being pursued by ants. He did not realize that the whole incident had taken place almost under his very nose until the horse thief was urging his mount up the slope at his feet.

Then it was that Reverdy saw that the pursuers—coming out in greater numbers from the

forest on the cañon side—had grown to a big band.

At first sight he had seen that they were breeds or Indians, but not until they reached the base of the slope, was he sure that they were Navahos.

The horse thief—needless to say, was his “pard” of the night before—Slink Bottiler.

Slink kicked viciously at his mount as he topped the rim of the cañon. Reverdy had wheeled his own horse preparatory to flight.

“Get out of here, pronto, Plunk!” Slink called to him. “They won’t ask no questions—they renegades.”

Plunk took him at his word. From what he had heard about some of those Navahos he decided to avoid any complication.

A man acquainted with their tricks and manners knew that for a week or two it would be wise to get out of that vicinity.

Plunk turned his horse and started at a mad gallop along the top of the mesa, in the direction of Mule Town.

Slink Bottiler took another tack and disappeared in a deep ravine where his horse slid on haunches down an adobe bank for a good hundred yards.

When the pursuers reached the mesa top they saw a rider galloping his horse through the sage. Naturally enough they followed him.

It was Plunk Reverdy.

The latter could not help thinking, as he galloped his horse along, that destiny was calling him

to account for shaking the hand of that horse thief.

To show the far-reaching results of Slink Bottiler's adventure with those Navahos it is necessary to transfer this account for a short space to the activities of Mule Town.

When I say activities, I speak figuratively. The only active inhabitants of Mule Town on a hot day are the horseflies.

The cantinas were as quiet as empty barns. The rows of ponies at the water troughs at the sidewalk's edge stood dumb and drowsy with scarcely enough energy to swish their tails.

A certain species of humanity which is impervious to sun, wind, blowing sand—to everything in fact except water—could be found in the street: I mean the Mexican kids, half-clothed and playing in the hot dust. You could hear a guitar sounding "La Paloma" through an adobe doorway, in hesitant plunks.

Into this scene of deadly heat, peace and ennui, rode a half-breed Navaho and Mexican. He was an insolent looking fellow with slits of eyes, a flat brown face, big jaws and the shoulders and arms of a gorilla.

He singled out the best cantina in town—the Rex—and ordered refreshment. Usually a man of his stamp had the decency to stay on the Mexican side of the street.

He was refused a drink.

At this, he said. "No matter!" and asked for the sheriff.

"He's from John Powderhorn's outfit," the veterinary whispered. "Better get the sheriff."

The barkeep was glad enough to get out.

The breed meanwhile slouched over to one of the gaming tables and threw himself into a chair. They could refuse him a drink; they could turn their backs on him; they could even attempt to throw him out—and probably they would succeed. But wait! Every score would be settled.

"Who the hell is that hombre?" one of the gamblers asked the veterinary.

"Don't know, but I know his chief. A half-breed Navaho lives over in a ole ghost-town in the Sierra and has gathered a couple hundred of the worst desert wolves about him ever bred in this country. Powderhorn's his name—and our sheriff you kin bet keeps clear of him."

"What's the matter with the Board of Indian Commissioners then?" the gambler asked.

"They keep clear, too. Leastwise they try not to see anything shady Powderhorn does. As a matter of fact, the old renegade keeps clear of them, too. He don't bother us white men—not out and out. He raided a Mex Town in Sonora a couple years back, and they say it was only because of some petty spite. Anyways, he killed every man, woman and child in that town—and burnt same to the ground! Which the town ain't never been rebuilt since."

"Did you say two hundred renegades?" the gambler asked incredulously.

"That's all as he has at his own settlement. But they's a tribe of Yumans in a canon near-by. Might you've heard tell of Yumans?"

The other nodded.

"They're the same compared with Hopis or Navahos as desert coyotes is to dogs. They're lean, allus fightin' drunk. Can go four days without water in the desert—which no other tribes can.

"Well, pard, this fellow John Powderhorn has a sway over 'em. They believe he's a sort of witch doctor. He's known to of cured the sick with his cuppin' horn and jesako drum and such. Fact is, he's got a religion mixed up of all them tribes' beliefs. Sort of a fanatic. Navahos and Hopis—and them filthy Wallapais as well.

"And this tribe of Yumans goes on the war-path any time Powderhorn says so. And the agent for Navahos up to the San Juan Agency—he cain't pin their murders and thievin's and wars on Powderhorn at all. The wily ole trade-rat gits clear every time."

The gambler looked across his table to the other side of the room where John Powderhorn's henchman was calmly surveying the bar.

"If they're all like that bird," the gambler remarked, shaking his head, "I just as soon stay clear of him. Looks like a buzzard waitin' for somethin' to die."

"That reminds me," said the veterinary. "They do just what you say."

"What-all do you mean—what did I say?"

"They wait—like buzzards till their prey dies—down here in Sody Mesa. Listen to this: A year back they was a train of homesteaders—amountin' to thirty or forty—who went down there, got lost and began weakenin' for want of water. Powderhorn and a gang of his renegades watched 'em from the ravines high on a mesa's edge where it was cooler and they was in the shade.

"They could of told them homesteaders that they were within a couple of miles of a good water pocket. Instead they just watched 'em goin' mad, tearin' off their clothes and plungin' along shoutin' into what they thought was the surf—I mean of course them mirages in Sody Mesa.

"After they was pretty near all daid—'ceptin' one who got to the water pocket after a day—why, Powderhorn and his breeds went down and took their wagons and what hosses was left—and their money and grub. That's the kind of buzzards they are."

The barkeep who had been after the sheriff, returned. He said to the giant breed that Sheriff Hornuff was at his office in the U. J. mine shack and open for appointment.

Several men followed the Indian as he went out in the street. Others came from surrounding shacks. The board sidewalks of Mule Town—

a moment before deserted — were suddenly creaking with the weight of all Mule Town's population.

The breed went into the little room where Sheriff Hornuff sat, feet on desk.

Hornuff had evidently arranged to have this interview alone. Two ranchers in linen dusters, chewing tobacco, got up when the breed entered, and went into the street.

Hornuff's "office" was a barn of a room with a saddle on the floor, a line of bridles and quirts on the wall, a water-jar in the corner. The place was hot and filled with smoke from the sheriff's stubby cigar.

The breed stood dressed with lop-brimmed felt sombrero, black shirt, wampum vest with its corn-and-plant design, and ragged trousers. The latter were tucked up by garters just below the knee, but the fringe trailed in the dust about his lop-sided boots. A big toe stuck out of a ragged boot. He was a giant of insolence and dirt and rags towering among smoke clouds, crossbanded with hot sunbeams.

The sheriff had buckled on his holster which a moment before had hung on a peg.

He knew this breed: a very hard character. He did not know his name. Perhaps he had no name.

"What do you want in this town, hombre?" Hornuff asked.

"I am herald-priest from John Powderhorn."

"Yes, I know Old John."

Yes indeed! He had good cause to know him. Hornuff knew him well! And the United States Indian agent knew him well. And the commandant at Fort Winfield knew him well. A man who had started in as a horse trader and ended up as a witch doctor and a chief.

"Do you mind specifyin', hombre," he said, "just what old John wants of me?"

The breed paused, and there was an awkward silence.

Sheriff Hornuff, realizing that this visit was of an ambassadorial nature, produced a jug.

The breed drank, and his words came more smoothly.

"Bye'm bye, Big Chief sing Navaho war chant. He take witch bundles; he take jesako drum. He have many braves between this town and Fort Winfield. Fort Winfield no hear 'em news."

"What news for hell's sake?" the sheriff asked.

"Him news of destruction."

"Destruction of what?"

"Of all men, squaws and children in this town, and of the xacallis. Of everything except only cuitans and whisky. Big Chief John Powderhorn take 'em off cuitans and whisky."

"Well of all the damn yelpin' yaller curs!" Sheriff Hornuff cried, forgetting the necessary dignity of this ambassadorial court. "I've a good mind to plug you here and now! What-all do you think you mean runnin' a blaze like that! A half-

breed skunk like you comin' into a sheriff's office and givin' me this gaff! "

Completely unmoved, the breed gave his message:

"White hombre rustle our cayuses. We give him chase. He kill him one of our witch doctors. Youth who is kinsman of Powderhorn; son of his sister. White hombre ride away. Come to this town. He is pale face—and his race must pay 'em penalty. John Powderhorn is just chief. If you find him this pale face rustler and give him to us, Hi-yu-skookum! No penalty! "

"If not —"

"Then John Powderhorn and his braves, his nephews, his sons, and tribes that catch 'em war treaty—all go on warpath. And when we go back to lodge and wickiups and dance cachucha, and chant Dream Chant—then no man will know where your town stood. "

"Is that all you have to say? " Sheriff Hornuff replied, his face purple with rage.

The ragged breed nodded, smiling.

"Well, then, get the hell out of here before I mash every bone in your filthy yaller carcass. "

John Powderhorn's ambassador obeyed, although he gave no particular disposition to hurry. His withdrawal from the sheriff's office in fact was accomplished with considerable dignity. A ragged giant of a man with a lop-brimmed sombrero went out into the glare of the sun. Altho he was the most dilapidated man in that whole

street, the knowledge that he represented a far greater power than Mule Town could summon was clearly evident in his bearing.

His bearing was, it must be pointed out, a little more than a sulky slouching movement, his torn boots shuffling along pigeon-toed in the dust. But he looked about at the crowd as one who pitied the helplessness of an inferior and doomed race.

CHAPTER XXIII

MULE TOWN PREPARES

THERE was no panic in Mule Town. The cantinas were still as quiet as empty barns. The rows of ponies at the watering troughs stood dumb and drowsy, swishing at flies with their tails, innocent of the work they would soon be put to. Mexican kids still made cliff dwellings and pictographs in the hot dust.

Sheriff Hornuff did not believe in panics. But he had a very serious job to attend to, and he went about it quietly.

An hour later—in answer to his summons—a dozen deputies were crowded into his little office—grim, expectant figures looming in thick clouds of tobacco smoke.

The Mule Town folk who had witnessed this gathering of the best gunmen on the range, jumped immediately to the conclusion that there was to be a lynching party. And the man who was to be lynched was probably that laconic, high-cheek boned, grinning breed who had asked their sheriff for a "personal interview." They were mistaken.

"Gents," Sheriff Hornuff said. "I may as well tell you right off the bat: John Powderhorn is goin' on the warpath to-morry night."

There was a dead silence. No change of expressions. One or two puffed a little faster—that was all.

“Now, I’ll give my orders, then I’m open to suggestions. First I’ll say what some of you know already: John Powderhorn’s a hard character to palaver with. He knows how to trade a bad burro for a good hoss without sayin’ more’n two words. He’s got the best hosses on the range—a good many of ’em with brands blotched.

“He ain’t rustled any of our hosses for some time, bein’ I’ve kept the peace with him—solely by keepin’ my mouth shut and givin’ him gifts of whisky and chewin’ gum. And they ain’t no use us palaverin’ with him in the present instant neither. You-all may know that without my sayin’ it over ag’in.”

“What does he want to appropriate this time, chief?” asked the veterinary.

“The whole damn town.”

They all puffed faster at this; they thought; they wanted to ask a dozen questions. Finally the old veterinary suggested:

“He generally gives somethin’ in exchange for what he steals, chief—same as a trade-rat. What-all does he offer for our town?”

“That’s the truth,” the sheriff replied quietly. “He’s offerin’ to make a trade this time likewise. It seems that some fool renegade has bumped off John Powderhorn’s favorite nephew. Bein’ John Powderhorn is part Navaho, a nephew means

more to him—as you know—than even a son. To kill a Navaho's nephew is the same as killin' a white man's first-born. So there we are: John Powderhorn wants us to catch the murderer and deliver same over to him—so's his squaws kin torture him."

They all thought some more, the veterinary again being the one to make the only suggestion, which was quite an obvious one:

"Well, why not catch him? If it'll save the town and all of our hosses and wives and kids, I'll catch anybody and give him up."

"I reckon we might do it. If we had a couple weeks—and every man in town helped all he could with the search," said the sheriff.

There seemed to be a movement of enormous relief. Those who had puffed out their cigars lighted them. Cigarettes were rolled, or tobacco juice was spit. They knew their sheriff was good at trailing down criminals. Mark how he had trailed down the dread Tarante—cheated only in his quarry by death. Mark how he had plucked a Papago thief-girl out of the heart of Soda Mesa Desert—and arrested her for knifing a cowherder.

Yes, they were all satisfied. Sheriff Hornuff would save the town easily enough. It would take time—but he would catch his man.

Then came the thunderbolt:

"We have until to-morry night."

This made a very definite change in the attitude of twelve men.

But the veterinary pleaded: "Get him to give us more time and promise him we'll git his man for him."

"John Powderhorn don't take promises, bein' he knows how easily they're broke by himself."

"Beg him for a few days. Give him a couple barrels of jackass."

"He's too sharp a trade-rat for that. In three days we kin have a few troops of U. S. Regulars from Fort Winfield."

There was no answer to this even from the inventive veterinary.

"All righto, chief," one of the deputies said. "What's your orders."

The chief sat down at his desk. He had thought it all out before calling his men together. He was a methodical man. He reminded the gang of a general about to take out military plans, maps, orders.

Instead his hand emerged from a drawer with a pack of cards.

"I'm goin' to send three of you gents to Fort Winfield. That's the first step in our defense. The three who goes will be three who draws lowest from this deck."

"Why draw for it? I offer to go," said the veterinary. "I know the trail. It's an easy trail."

"It won't be easy this time," said Sheriff Hornuff. "John Powderhorn has it covered."

"In that case we might as well draw," said the veterinary.

The faces on the men as they drew their cards were as immobile as if they were at stud poker. The men who drew deuces or three-spots acted as unconcerned as a seasoned gambler filling into a straight flush. They accepted their luck with the same philosophy. If Hornuff had designated the three men they would have accepted just as stoically.

A young cowboy, a white-haired rancher, a wind-burned, desert-scarred prospector were appointed by the goddess of chance to ride to Fort Winfield for help.

The goddess of chance proposed, but John Powderhorn disposed.

Not one of the three ever got there.

CHAPTER XXIV

HORNUFF PALAVERS

THE rest of the sheriff's orders were simple and clear.

"Soggy and Jack will recruit as many men and boys in the neighborhood as can tote guns. Leave 'em congregate here in the street outside the U. J. mine offices. Pink, you take half a dozen men—which you kin draft same anywhere you want—and ride to all the surroundin' ranches. Give the news that John Powderhorn is on the warpath to-morry night, and that all women and children and valuable hosses will be protected if same is brought to Mule Town."

He turned to the veterinary:

"Doc, I ain't anticipatin' no long siege, and no great pitched battle. But I do figure Powderhorn will keep his word to the extent of tryin' to burn down our town. He ain't never kep' his word before—but this case is different. He's got a bit of stinkin' Wallapai blood in him aside from bein' a Navaho with a smirch of Mex. Which you kin always trust 'em for one thing only—and that is to get their revenge.

"Now I make these remarks so's to lead up to a warnin' which I want everybody to take without

throwin' any hysterics: they'll be some gunshootin' by to-morry night — unless we find the hoss thief. They ain't one chanst in a thousand of findin' same. Which we kin lay to the fack that we-all have got to fight."

"Why you directin' all these remarks to me?" the veterinary asked.

"No, I don't expect you to do much fightin', doc," the sheriff said. "But I expect you to do most of the work. I want the Rex cantina turned into a hospital."

"Holy smoke!" the veterinary murmured. "You shore have a powerful lot of respect for John Powderhorn."

"All cantina gals which cain't handle a six-gun will help clean same—and will ack as nurses when the shootin' begins. Let 'em start in right now cuttin' up shirts."

"What sort of war do you expect, chief?" the veterinary asked in some alarm.

The sheriff twisted his mustache and bit the end for a moment. They all waited for his prognostication:

"Oh, I suppose, gents," he said calmly, "just an ordinary Mule Town jamboree."

This seemed to reassure them. They laughed. They slapped their knees; they began to nudge each other and double their fists and throw away their cigar stubs.

"They cain't enter Mule Town without they climb down them adobe banks on the east and

west of the cañon," the sheriff explained. "Which it means we'll have good targets. The pass at the lower edge, leadin' from Goldpan Gulch into the desert can be guarded by a few men. The biggest detachment I'll deploy all around the town *versus* the cañon walls. That will be our defense."

"Don't you figure, chief," the veterinary inquired, "that we-all should be on the lookout for the hoss thief which did the killin' and started all this rumpus?"

"You kin all look as hard as you like," said the sheriff with a shrug. "Ask anywhere—at every ranch you ride to if any suspicious character has been snoopin' around. Or if any stock has been rustled. We'll put up signs too with a reward. But if you think any man's goin' to show hisself when there's a chanst of his bein' delivered to John Powderhorn's squaws for torture, you ain't analyzin' this thing the right way. Which the way I analyze it is that we get set for a hot time to-morry night."

This was the opinion of all. There were no objections; no suggestions. They knew Sheriff Hornuff handled things in a big way, a complete way. If there was a chance for a palaver he would get it.

If there was a chance to save the lives of the women and children intrusted to his care he would be the first to take advantage of it.

They arose from seats, table edge, window sills.

"One thing else, gents," Hornuff said. "They's a point that's been troublin' me—concernin' this whole business. You've got to warn everybody you see to stay off the open range from now on. John Powderhorn's gang won't be over-sentimental and kindly to anybody which they may meet in the desert and like places."

"We understand that, chief," one of the men answered. "We'll spread the warnin'."

"And they's one person in particular which I wish you'd get the warnin' to—if it ain't too late." He looked around as if trying to single out the men who would take his view of this very personal matter. "Nell Brower," he said quietly, "trailed down there into the desert for to find Plunk Reverdy—"

The men changed expressions. Some grumbled.

"Serves her right. Throwin' herself away because of that yaller-livered coot."

"She was the cause of my gettin' wounded when we tried to brand Reverdy," another grumbled.

"John Powderhorn wont trouble *that* couple, chief!" said a third. "Like as not Reverdy will make a dicker with him, so's to save his own hide."

"'Taint Plunk Reverdy I'm talkin' about," the sheriff explained. "It's the gal."

"Wall, any gal which she'll ally herself with a coyote like that don't deserve to be warned," said the veterinary.

Sheriff Hornuff showed the first bit of excitement and asperity he had evinced during this whole palaver.

"That ain't the way to talk, doc," he shouted. "You know how it is when you're tryin' to save a calf from dyin'; how you'll work night and day—in particular if it's a no-account calf, and give it more attention than you would a good big strap-pin' steer? Wall, that's the way I feel about every little Mex kid that's under my care right now. And it's the way I feel about Plunk Reverdy's gal. I want her saved."

"I'll ride down and see if I kin overtake her afore she hits the desert trail, chief," a cowherder said.

"She's got a long head start on you, Joe," said the sheriff. "But you're a fast rider. She started last night. Most like she'll spend the hot part of to-day at that sutler's cabin down at the gateway to Soda Mesa. Hurry, and see if you can get there."

This finished the sheriff's presentation of his defense. The men went about their several duties; the doctor to the cantina to organize the town women; two others went out to enlist the fighting personnel of the town. Another left to find some riders to warn the surrounding ranches.

Finally, the old cowpuncher who had offered to undertake the mission which seemed the most dangerous but of the least importance, mounted his horse and rode toward Soda Mesa Desert to call back Nell Brower.

Now this old cowherder will not go down into history as a very brave man, despite the flare of courage that his offer indicated. Nor will he go down in history as a very important man.

He accomplished nothing. And I doubt if he could have accomplished anything, even if he had been any braver.

When he got down toward the plain where Goldpan Gulch opened into the desert, he saw a band of Navahos heading westward for John Powderhorn's settlement in the Sierra. He did not dare meet them face to face after the warning the sheriff had given out. He even protected himself so far as to hide in a narrow barranca, holding his horse's nose as they passed.

The Navahos looked like animals which had run themselves gaunt in the desert. They were duplicates of that giant breed who had come to Mule Town as Powderhorn's emissary. The cowherder imagined that they had been without water for days, getting their liquid nourishment from quail eggs, mesquite beans and the blood of rabbits. He recalled also that these savages lived on chuckwallas.

They passed. He came from his hiding place and rode on farther south, hoping to find the trail of Nell Brower.

Then he saw another band of them—heading likewise toward Powderhorn's settlement.

That was enough.

The old cowherder considered—after his fifty

years or more on that range—that discretion was the better part of valor.

He went home and told the sheriff what he had seen. Apart from that, his ride accomplished nothing. And there was no one else who considered it wise to trail off down there into the Soda Mesa country in search of an inconsequential girl.

CHAPTER XXV

NELL AND THE DESERT TRAIL

AT the gateway of Soda Mesa Desert two table mountains came together so that they almost touched. In fact they looked more like one than two—making a limitless plateau with a top as flat as the horizon, cut in the center, leaving a narrow gorge.

A sutler occupied a few shacks here. He had a corral with some horses and mules; a store for the outfitting of prospectors; and—most important of all—a spring of water which made a pool in a clay basin.

At this oasis Nell Brower saw a big-boned Indian watering his horse. The girl decided to rest her own mount, and to sleep during the hot part of the day—as Sheriff Hornuff had estimated.

The keeper of the place came out. He was an old man who ordinarily kept his tongue to himself. These sutlers on the desert edge had to be careful about disseminating news.

In this case, however, he could see no reason for not answering the girl's question.

"Have I seen Plunk Reverdy? No, I haven't. But I seen prospectors comin' north who had news of him. Reverdy had been trailin' a cavy of wild

hosses through the desert. Chased 'em clear to the edge afore he could connect up with 'em. Then he followed their tracks and found same leadin' to a Mexican rancho—and there the whole cavy was corralled—”

“Then he found the horse he was after!” the girl exclaimed joyfully.

“Not exactly. He seen the cavy there—and he said they were the mares he'd been trailin' for days. He knew every one of 'em—a couple of sorrels, three pintos, a claybank with a white hand on her croup; a blue-crane. All of 'em worn out, and their manes clotted with burrs and their hides torn with rocks and mesquite. The whole cavy was there—but as for the old king hisself—nary a sign!”

The girl sank to a chair in the store. “Where is Reverdy now?” she cried despairingly. “Not still trailing that—”

“Sure! Still as daft as ever. You see, ma'am, he'd almost got there in time. Because them ranchers likewise corralled the ole hoss with the stars on his face. But a half-breed sheep herder comes along and offers five dollars for the hoss. And the ranchers, seein' he waren't much account as a hoss anyways, and totally without spirit, and gettin' on in years, sold him. They found the sheep herder dead that night in a gully. What got him no one knew—”

“I know!” the girl exclaimed. “The horse killed him.”

The sutler chuckled. "Well, ma'am, that ain't quite reasonable. You see, he was a gentle hoss well worked over and stove up. Just a ole stock hoss."

"Nevertheless, the old brute had a spell—just as he did when he threw Plunk Reverdy."

"All right, ma'am," the host laughed. He would not argue with a lady. But he couldn't help chuckling merrily to himself: "'Threw Plunk Reverdy'—that's pretty good!"

She argued no more with him. She spent the six or seven hours of baking heat resting as she had planned. It was a hard journey through the depths of suffocating ravines, before she could reach the next outfit—a prospector's diggings. Her hope was that she could obtain more accurate information there about the whereabouts of her lover.

If she had ever taken that journey she would not have been disappointed. It was well within the limits of the desert, and she would not only have found out where her lover was—she would actually have met him.

But this happy outcome was denied her.

It so happened that several Navaho breeds came riding across the flat mesa top, then zig-zagged down the mesa wall toward the sutler's cabin.

They were anything but prepossessing looking gentlemen with their matted hair falling under ragged sombreros to their shoulders; their black

woolen shirts bagging over coyote skin belts; their holsters hanging over torn denim trousers. One of them, partly Mexican, boasted of the only clean article of apparel—a pair of cheap yellow shoes that buttoned up the side.

They went into the sutler's cabin and ordered chewing tobacco, for which they refused to pay.

"No money," they said.

The sutler, who was always afraid, but whose avarice was more important than his diplomacy, grumbled at them:

"Bein' this is a outfittin' store, what-all are you hombres doin' here if you ain't got any money?"

"We're waiting for one of our tribe," said the only one who could speak English. "Big hombre—giant hombre. Hi-yu-skookum fighter. John Powderhorn sent him to Mule Town with message. John Powderhorn is dancing war dance."

The sutler became somewhat more friendly. The name of John Powderhorn had a miraculous effect.

"All right, gents; you're welcome to make this your headquarters. But I cain't be outfittin' no one without I gets reimbursement for same. I'm a poor man."

"John Powderhorn is on warpath——" began the unwelcome guest. "White hombre kill-um John's kinsman."

The sutler winced, scratched his stubble chin, then burst out as if by inspiration:

"Oh, that's all right about that tobaccy. You're

welcome to it. My compliments, gents."

Knowing John Powderhorn's propensity for chewing gum, the sutler added: "And here's some fresh gum for ole John. My compliments. Don't forgit to mention my name. John's a good square gent."

They shuffled out, laughing. Some of them spat out the tobacco and fell to the gum.

The sutler followed them out and went to the corral where Nell Brower was packing her burro and saddling her horse.

"Look here, ma'am, I've got some powerful bad news for you. You cain't be trailin' for the desert. Get along home as fast as you kin ride. Them breeds are John Powderhorn's men. Powderhorn—he's on the warpath."

The girl took this for what it was worth: as very bad news.

"If you get out in the desert very far, you'll be attacked. And this outfit of mine ain't worth much more'n adobe mud if what they say is true."

The girl had heard of Powderhorn many a time. She knew something about Indians and their ways and their fears. Powderhorn was a medicine man as well as a cattle rustler and chieftain. They feared him as they would a witch doctor. He was a cloud-swallower, a magician. He had once been a coyote—and had turned himself into a mole and then to a grizzly bear. What he said all tribes believed.

"If he's on the warpath, everybody in Sody Mesa Desert better watch their step."

"I know that," the girl said. "Do you think I'll turn back now? I'm going on—to warn Plunk Reverdy."

The sutler held up his hands in disgust. "Wall, if you're still daft on that subject, all right! I ain't got time to argue."

He went back for his holster and six-gun. Also for gifts. He must dispense chewing gum and jugs of jackass and canned tobacco prodigally. Then if he could be sure of the news he must pack up his mules and his horses with what little of his outfit he could save, and get to Mule Town as quick as his beasts of burden could eat up trail.

The girl was just about to hit off for the south, when the breed whom the Indians had been waiting for, returned.

He had come from Mule Town, after delivering his chief's ultimatum. And he came riding in pride.

The gang of Indians went to him and he gave them the news, which seemed to light their faces.

There was a long palaver with their heads together out there near the corral.

Nell Brower and the old sutler watched with a vital interest. It would be best, the girl agreed, that she wait until they left before riding away alone.

But they did not leave. There was more palaver in low voices, low grunts. They cast surreptitious glances toward the girl. Some nodded—others shook their heads of matted dirty hair.

Finally the breed who had ridden from Mule Town shuffled across the weeds and dust, hitched up his belt, and addressed Nell.

"Who are you?"

"Who am I?" the girl exclaimed, with a timid attempt at dignity. She felt the sutler pinching her elbow.

"Don't sass this hombre, gal," he whispered. "Answer him straight out."

"I'm a teacher. I teach school in Eagle Feather Cañon. My name is Nell Brower."

"Where you live?"

"What do you want to know that for?"

Again the old sutler warned her, saying this time so that the breed could hear: "Go on, gal, answer him. He's a polite gent, and it's a polite question."

"I live in Mule Town."

The breed grunted. "Then heap wise if you live somewhere else. Because tomorrow night—pht!—no Mule Town."

His companions laughed at this and shuffled over toward him. They stood behind him, their eyes glowing.

"I am not going back to Mule Town," the girl replied.

"Then where are you going?"

"That is my business."

The old sutler again felt that diplomacy was advisable under these circumstances.

"She's a good gal, gents. She's tryin' to find

her man—who's trailin' around this here desert huntin' for a hoss he lost. Might you-all have heard of Plunk Reverdy?"

"You hunt 'em Plunk Reverdy?" the breed asked.

"Yes." The girl felt a surge. Perhaps they had trace of him. "You know who Plunk Reverdy is?"

Their faces were blank. This meant nothing. They were always blank. There was no chance of reading those high cheek-boned visages—or those inscrutable eyes.

One of them said:

"You hunt this no-good Plunk Reverdy who turned *klathmana*—like they have at the Zuni reservation?"

"I don't know what a *klathmana* is," said the girl. "All I know is that Reverdy is a great man and a hero and a fighter."

The breed shook his head.

"Then ees not the Plunk Reverdy I hear of. Hombre which I know, he is *klathmana*—for he has forsake the work of hombre and become a squaw. As *klathmanas* becomes squaw and do him squaw work—because no like 'em warpath."

"Yes—you have the wrong man!" the girl cried, her face hot, her lips trembling, her fear completely gone. "My Plunk Reverdy is a hero—and he will prove himself one when he finds the horse he is trailing."

"Oh, yes, I have hear some place," said the

breed with an insolent smile. "He is trailing *cuitan* with stars on gray face."

The girl bit her lip. She said nothing to this. Even these renegade Indians despised her lover.

"You come along with us, little squaw," the breed said abruptly.

The old sutler backed away. This scene was getting too dangerous for one of his age.

"What do you mean by that, you insolent breed?" the girl cried, backing away to where the old sutler was cringing. She took his arm—as a child will take the arm of a big brother for protection. What a grim and nonsensical gesture that was!

The girl found that she was supporting the old sutler, instead of clinging to him for help. His arm was limp and trembling.

"I take you to big chief," said the breed. "Big chief will say I am wise—bring him hostage in return for his nephew."

"For God's sake, gal, run for your life! Hop on your pony and ride like hell. No, don't go into the store—they'll burn it down!"

"Come along, little squaw. No like palaver," the breed coaxed. "Mebbe I catch 'em star-on-face cayuse."

The girl paused—on the brink of flight.

"What did you say!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—the cayuse this *klathmana* is trailing. I know where catch 'em. I rope him star-on-face for you."

"Run, gal, I'm tellin' you! Afore they sneak up on you. They're surroundin' us. Duck behind the shack. They won't shoot you. Git to your hoss! "

"You say you know where the star-faced horse is?" the girl was saying.

"I catch 'em cayuse."

"You lie. You have never seen him. You don't know where he is!" the girl burst out, with a sudden realization that it was all a trick to smooth over her capture.

One of the Navahos jumped—with the precipitant crouch and leap of a puma—at the old sutler, clutching him by the throat. The old man sank to his knees, wailing:

"Don't hurt me, gents! I ain't done nothin'! I'll keep my mouth shut. I ain't resistin'. What have I done? Ain't I give you everything you asked? Don't hurt me, I beg yer! "

The giant breed went toward the girl. She drew her revolver, but he struck it from her with a powerful and lightning sweep.

Then, laughing, without any change of expression on his flat face, he took her two wrists.

She tussled. He unstrapped his belt and started to wind it about her arms.

"If you do that," one of his companions cautioned, "John Powderhorn will shoot you."

The girl looked up with fire in her eyes. She knew a thing or two about Navahos in general—yes, and about John Powderhorn in particular.

He was supposed to be a queer combination of justice and treachery.

"Very well," she said calmly. "I will ride with you. But if you lay a finger on me again, I will tell John Powderhorn."

The breed seemed to see the significance of this. He did not want to be shot. He wanted a gift of cayuses and jugs of red-eye, and some spangled dresses and plumed hats for his fat squaw—the kind of hats and dresses the white cantina girls wore in Mule Town.

In short, the breed was performing an act which was complicated by the exigencies of diplomacy and war.

He permitted the girl to mount and he led her pony down the trail. The rest of the gang followed, forsaking the old sutler to his personal fears.

The girl had the correct conviction that as long as she made no attempt to escape she would save herself from being manhandled.

CHAPTER XXVI

JOHN POWDERHORN

JOHN POWDERHORN and his band of renegades inhabited a ghost-town called Desolation.

This was a group of shacks which had been erected on the edge of a mesa some fifty years before in bonanza days. Its history was brief—the ordinary history of many of these mining camps which had a flare of riotous life, then went out like a match in the wind. Here was Desolation left to the coyote, the billows of sand, the sidewinder, the roadrunner, the centipede.

Then came something worse: a human being who had the imagination of a Homer, the trickery of a kit fox.

John Powderhorn had achieved his wealth by horse trading—mixed with a large amount of thievery and one superb stroke of luck: A silver mine had been discovered on some of his own land.

That was only a part of his history—the less important part. He had spent three years in a penitentiary for one of his murders—and it was only his money that saved his neck. When he emerged from jail he came as a butterfly from

the imprisoning cocoon. He had been a worm. Now he was a witch-doctor.

It was in this capacity that he became the leader of several tribes of Navahos in the Soda Mesa country. The Indian chiefs followed him because of his bribes; their people followed him because he was a jesako priest with the power to see into the body of the sick; the power to suck out the evil spirit; the power to change from a mole to a bear, to a man; the power to raise certain warriors from the dead.

Indeed, it was said he had three of these warriors in his settlement of shacks at Desolation, and no man could take their charmed lives!

To see this giant, white-maned Indian sitting in what had once been the sheriff's office, you would not think you were looking at any such sorcerer. They called him a cloud swallower, a jesako, a shaman—but you could only see a loose-jointed, gin-sodden, piebald, wrinkle-faced breed. And he was forever chewing gum.

He spent most of the time—during the days whereof this chronicle deals—quarreling with his sons and nephews about the assembling of a machine gun which he had purchased from a Mexican general.

They went about this occupation on the floor of the sheriff's office—a dozen of them squatted on their hunkers, with screws and springs and rods and cartridges strewn all about with the dust and tobacco cuds and gum wads. Old John spat out

his gum when the flavor was gone. That was why he needed an inexhaustible supply.

Outside, the street was noisy in preparation. The renegades were choosing their horses and weapons for the coming expedition. Squaws were waddling about with saddle packs. Mongrel dogs—a hundred of them—were yelping and snooping about. The place was swarming with half-nude children with sore eyes and mangy hair.

Into this scene came a white girl, Nellie Brower, and the gang of ragged horsemen who had captured her.

Despite the fact that she had had a scorching journey through the deep rocky gulches of the Sierra foothills, she seemed strangely fresh and lovely in that setting. Her dark ringlets, as dark as the hair of those Indians, shone with a luster, as if it were not black hair, but golden in a deep twilight. Her face was wan, but her very fear made it vivacious, agile in many expressions; terror and disgust, fatigue and hope were reflected there.

She saw the mongrel dogs and the mongrel children—but they made little impression on her.

The squaws stopped to gaze at her—and of these she was more afraid than of the men. She knew that certain of the Navaho squaws of the Soda Mesa Desert had declared their hatred for her—and for a very peculiar but definite reason: there was an intangible power—either a person or a tribe or a country or a supernatural force like the Bad Mind or the Cold Hand—which

their chiefs called "Washington." This "Washington" had decreed that the squaws give up their children to be educated at paleface schools.

Nell Brower—so they were given to understand—had something to do with these schools. Hence, they argued, she must be held guilty of that unforgivable sin—the stealing of their children.

As Nell was being taken to the erstwhile sheriff's office—now the capitol of John Powderhorn's nation—the squaws looked at her, and she thought she saw in their tight eyes the only indication of emotion she had ever seen in an Indian countenance.

She was glad that her captors rode with her—as a sort of mounted guard.

Thus they came past an empty lot, where some Indians were driving a paling of stakes. A medicine man, with jesako drum and feathers trailing in the dust, was painting the face of a man that reclined upon the ground. Dogs and children watched. Squaws watched from afar.

The ground was cursed. The man whose face was being painted a vivid red—the red of a Navaho blanket—was a dead man. They could not put him into one of the shacks—unless they burned the shack soon after. And John Powderhorn—originally a trader and business man—would have none of his shacks burned; not even for his favorite nephew.

For this dead man, being prepared for the

burial ceremonies, was none other than the murdered kinsman.

They brought her into the hot little shack which was Powderhorn's holy of holies.

"Who is this squaw?" he asked of her captors. John Powderhorn spoke Spanish, English and Navaho. This time he used the latter tongue—which the girl in a measure understood.

"Mule Town paleface squaw," said the breed. "I brought her to you for hostage."

Old John muttered ominously that he had made a law concerning paleface squaws. His men were not to touch them. Too much trouble ensued. White men, yes. Squaws, no. Except in time of battle—"and then," he added, "you can kill them."

But this was the time of battle, the breed said. His hopes of a few ollas of liquor and a few cayuses appeared to be diminishing. This woman was worth ten fighting men. John Powderhorn could dicker with the big chief at Mule Town—their sheriff. He would do anything to get her back. He would give up ten men for her.

But old John pointed out that he did not want ten men. He wanted the one man who killed his nephew.

The big square face of Powderhorn, the eagle eyes that had stared for seventy years at desert suns, turned upon her. It was a face as cruel and inscrutable, as devoid of expression as a piece of

hide, deeply cross-hatched with wrinkles like a gila monster's skin, mottled, smooth, piebald.

When you take a white woman prisoner, it always means trouble. They would rather have you kill her—than take her prisoner, old John explained. It would be best to let this squaw go—or kill her.

The breed whom he had sent to Mule Town objected to either of these alternatives.

The Mule Town people were going to fight. So the herald-priest explained. They would not search for the murderer of John's nephew because they thought it impossible to find him. The herald-priest pleaded that to make them search the harder—he had brought this squaw.

Powderhorn took another piece of gum, chewed at it, and rolled the tin foil and paper into a ball.

His eyes narrowed. He nodded his silvery maned head.

Powderhorn asked if they knew he had a machine gun?

They did not know. The herald reported that the whites would try to hold Powderhorn's men off until soldiers came from Fort Winfield.

"Very well," Powderhorn said in his pigeon-English, "I will keep this squaw. I keep her alive till to-morrow night. Then I send Mule Town her scalp on coup stick. But if they catchem murderer of my nephew then I free this paleface squaw."

The breed stood at attention. No change came

over his broad brown face, but if he had been a dog, his tail would have wagged.

He suggested that he had been through great danger to get this squaw.

Powderhorn grunted. Yes, his herald-priest had done it for gain. He knew him well! Hi-yu-skookum. The herald-priest would have his reward — whatever he thought just.

The herald asked what would be the objection to three ponies that had been broken to the saddle.

John Powderhorn shook his head angrily and answered in his English: "Hell damn! What white squaw is worth three ponies?"

Ah, Powderhorn would find this woman worth a lot when Mule Town heard of her capture. They would then try to find the man old John wanted! Thus spoke the breed, who was, in a manner of speaking, something of a wizard himself.

"I no pay three ponies for any squaw in the world," said John Powderhorn. "Especially if saddle broke. That means that three horse breakers have risk' life!"

Very well. The herald would be satisfied with two.

"Catchum pinto. Give him herald-priest for pay," the big chief capitulated.

The breed went out for his reward. The chief turned his piebald countenance again to his prisoner.

"You are heap big nuisance," he said in Eng-

lish. "You are heap very much in way. We stickum together machine gun here." He seemed at a loss. "Take squaw out of way. Lockem up in calf shed."

Another brave counseled that if old John wanted to keep her alive he had better protect her from the squaws.

John Powderhorn chewed as if in distress. It was true. "Heap very much nuisance. Damn, I get into trouble just because of you—and not because of wiping him Mule Town from map. Lockem up in closet."

There was a closet just off the sheriff's office which was cluttered with painted rawhide boxes, fiber bags and empty whisky bottles—all baking under a galvanized roof.

They led her into this oven, and she sank as if in a faint.

"Give her swig from tequila jug," said John.

She had an impression that the old renegade had a latent streak of mercy somewhere in his foul old carcass. But he dispelled this illusion:

"If we keep you alive, good! Paleface nation find rustler for me."

He called to one of his braves. "Very much nuisance. Not worth cayuse. Go get that cayuse I gave away. I have change' my mind."

The drink did not help the girl much in that fierce heat. It made her sick. The warped boards of the walls began to circle about her. She lay on the puncheon floor—for there was no furni-

ture. She lay there among empty bottles, a miserable and delicate creature, condemned to die on the morrow if John Powderhorn was not appeased.

The incredibly rapid firing of a whole company of riflemen aroused her. It sounded like a battle in full and glorious swing.

"They come to save me!" she told herself, excitedly. "Every American for a hundred miles around will come and wipe these beasts off the face of the earth."

The hope and illusion was sustained for a few moments. She wanted desperately to live. She yearned to live for that other mortal who had been thrown away among rubbish—as she was thrown among those empty bottles. She yearned for him, as much as she yearned for life.

"Plunk Reverdy has come and is leading the battle!"

But after a few moments the illusion was dispelled. The firing was in the very next room—through an empty window.

Peering through the cracks of the board walls, she saw the shots ricocheting over rock slabs, kicking up dust, and burying themselves in an adobe wall not far from Powderhorn's shack.

She knew that they had succeeded at last—after many days—in getting that machine gun to work.

CHAPTER XXVII

EVERYBODY SHINE UP!

EARLY in the morning of that appointed and memorable day Mule Town folk were out in the street.

Groups of men, cantina girls, ranch wives, boys, were gathered at certain places, intent on the perusal of Sheriff Hornuff's bulletins.

Don't nobody leave town from now on. Powderhorn and his Outlaws will pick off stragglers.

In front of the sheriff's office, they read this:

Don't worry. Plenty of Food and Water. And Them Outlaws wont git through the Pass till the Regulars from Winfield arrive. Then Goodnite to Powderhorn and every Stinkin Injun between Tuscon and Mexico.

That was the sign that had the largest group of readers—because they came back to read it over and over again. It warmed the cockles of their hearts. It made the men laugh; it reassured the women; it increased the frenzied joy of the Mule Town small boys who anticipated the zero hour with more excitement than a round-up or circus.

On the chowcart, on the swinging doors of gaming rooms, on the front of the shooting gallery, were pasted copies of this pronunciamiento:

Clean Guns is what we want. Everybody Shine Up.

Also you could see in strategic places—the U. J. mine offices, the stage coach office, and all the cantinas—this inscription in scrawled printing:

No booze to be drank from Now on

It will be seen from this that Sheriff Hornuff was a very systematic man. And it was lucky for Mule Town that this was the case. A hysteria was gripping the town, and at any time it might break out like herd madness, leaving a mass of men, women and children as easily attacked as an outfit of cows.

And while this imminent disaster was upon them the old duffers of the town were complicating this by offering suggestions. Previous raids—which had taken place anywhere between Montana and Texas—were acted out by eyewitnesses. Sheriff Hornuff—so these old men said—did not know his business. They should gather the women and children, the calves and blooded horses—and take them under escort toward Fort Winfield.

But Hornuff had seen a detachment of this sort wiped out once by a band of Indians. There was no cañon to retreat to that was any better for defense than the cañon in which Mule Town stood. To have all the fighters together was a good argument; likewise stragglers were pouring in all that day from the surrounding ranches. To take some of those women and children out in an attempt to reach Fort Winfield, was like sending

out a detachment of sheep into a desert peopled by wolves.

So Hornuff went about his business. The zero hour was at sunset that night.

Let them come.

All that morning ranchers from the surrounding range trailed toward Mule Town. They came whole outfits at a time; the cowboys armed with six-guns and rifles and shoulder holsters; the women and children riding in buckboards or wagons bringing with them a weaning calf, a favorite colt, and the best horses of their remudas. The herds were out on the open range grazing, for the round-up was a good way off. No use worrying about those herds. John Powderhorn nibbled away at them as much as he pleased, anyhow—war or no war.

Then about ten o'clock in the morning came an outfit from the direction of Soda Mesa Desert. It was the old trader who kept the outfitting post at the desert gateway. He had a string of heavily laden pack mules and a couple of saddle horses.

"It's bad news, chief," the old trader said to Sheriff Hornuff. "They've started already."

"What-all do you mean by that? Powderhorn was goin' to give us till to-night to find the murderer of his nephew."

"That's all right enough. But they're on the warpath already. Leastwise some of his men are. That gal Nell Brower come horsin' down to the desert; stopped at my place for a rest. A band

of Powderhorn's men showed up—and took her hostage."

"Took her hostage!" Sheriff Hornuff cried in a rage. "What-all do you mean by that?"

"Rustled her off!"

The old trader was surrounded. A dozen men began to pepper him with questions.

"Rustled her off?"

"Nell Brower? What was she doin' down thar? Huntin' for Plunk Reverdy? Serves her right!"

"Leave him tell us!" the sheriff cried. He turned to the old trader. "If you know so much about it why didn't you trail 'em?"

Others seconded this delicate question.

"Yes, how come you're safe home with your hide—and that poor little girl rustled off?"

"Are you all daft?" the old man cried. "They took her to John Powderhorn."

This stopped the mouths of his accusers.

"Was you there?" they demanded. "And let 'em do that?"

"I was thar, gents, and I'll tell you everything. I fought for her—with my bare hands—like a puma. Didn't have no gun. I fought with the last ounce of my ole wanin' strength. So help me God, I fought till I dropped unconscious. Woke up finding myself bound and gagged. And the gal was gone."

The news spread around town in fifteen minutes. "Nell Brower was rustled by Powderhorn's

men." It made Mule Town fighting mad. The men began to hope that nothing would happen to avert the fight.

In fact no more thought was given to the one loop-hole offered them: to find the horse thief who had killed Powderhorn's nephew. No one wanted to find him. They wanted to fight Powderhorn—and exterminate his whole crew.

The herders and townsmen, armed with their rifles, swarmed around the sheriff's office, clamoring for action. Their blood boiled. As the spirit of fight possessed them, cowboys began to yip and shout and sing songs. Although no one had indulged in Mule Town's fiery liquor, it looked like a Saturday night of carousing.

Finally, Sheriff Hornuff decided it was time to form his platoons of fighters and send them to their several posts outside the town limits.

A nondescript score of frontiersmen—crack shots all of them—were marched to the outskirts of the town where the cañon walls came down to meet the plain. They yipped and sang as they went, and the women stood on the board sidewalks, cheering, waving, running down to the sandy street to kiss this fighter or that good-by. A veritable procession it was, led by an old frontiersman on a pinto, and followed by a troop of dogs and boys.

The same thing was repeated when a detachment was sent to the southern end of the town. They sang songs, they shouted confident victory:

"All as we've got to do is to hold that pass till the regulars come from Fort Winfield!" That was the slogan.

"But what if the regulars don't come!" some pessimistic old woman said. It was the palmist—who had been doing a phenomenal business on the Mexican side of the street since the declaration of war. "My card pack gives forth that the rider sent to Fort Winfield is taken by Powderhorn's men."

"Wall, your card pack ain't overly accurate." said an old rancher. "Bein' three men was sent—and on different trails."

"What does your card pack say about three men?" they cried. She sat on the edge of the board sidewalk, and was immediately swallowed up in a gang of the more superstitious and more fearsome.

But fear had gradually vanished from Mule Town. The convening of all the cowboys from the ranches for miles around was not fertile soil for such an emotion. During the early part of that afternoon—that same aspect—the aspect of a *colmado de rodeo*—hung over the town.

Then something happened which changed everything.

From the detachment that had been sent to guard the southern pass two riders returned, bringing with them an Indian.

"This here bird, chief, has come with another message from Powderhorn. He left his pony and

six-gun down the cañon and held up a white shirt, so we let him in."

"How do you know he ain't got some dynamite in that thar medicine bag? Powderhorn's a great one for dynamite."

The Indian carried a bag or rabbit skin with a fringe of human hair.

"Ain't nothin' in it 'ceptin' some of his effects," said one of the guards. "And he said likewise Powderhorn's message is kep' therein."

"All right, Mr. Skunk," the sheriff said to the Indian ambassador. "What-all have you got to say."

The messenger announced calmly: "If you catchum bad hombre, big chief give back white squaw which his herald-priest takem prisoner at gateway of Soda Mesa Desert. And he will not harm her or any squaw or child or papoose or man in this town. But we drink ha-ho-wuck and smokum peace pipe. Big Chief Powderhorn no like 'em warpath. He like only catchum hombre who kill' his nephew."

"Otherwise he fights—eh?" the sheriff snorted. "Well, he's bitten off more'n he can chew then. *We* want to fight. And we're goin' to fight. And you shag back there and tell him if any harm comes to that girl, there won't be a yaller-livered Injun left between here and Mexico to tell the tale. Just wait till one day more—do all the attackin' you want. But when the regulars git here—then, blooey! You'll be grinnin'

just the way you are now—out of them brown teeth—but *you won't know it!*”

Yes, the man was grinning. It was not a grin that seemed to signify humor. It never signified anything—that grin which those half-breed Navahos wore when talking to enemy Big Chiefs. In this case, however, it seemed to have a certain radiance about it, born of a mordant humor.

And now as to that point about the regulars from Fort Winfield, the messenger had something very definite to say. But he did not say it in words. He said it in symbols.

He took that rabbit skin medicine bag of his which had been slung from his shoulder, and extracted a tobacco pouch. This he handed to the sheriff.

“I don't see anythin' incriminatin' about this tobacco pouch,” said the latter.

As he examined it, others of the men about him looked over his shoulder. Then suddenly one of them let out an oath.

“That thar's Smoo Johnson's tobacco pouch, chief!”

This was a thunderbolt. Smoo Johnson—as many of them knew well—was one of the three riders the sheriff had sent to Fort Winfield.

“Does this here mean that you've killed Johnson?” the sheriff exclaimed.

The messenger shrugged his shoulders. John Powderhorn had given his pledge that he would not start on the warpath until sundown. The

herald knew nothing of the owner of that tobacco bag.

"It means anyways that Powderhorn met up with him, chief," one of the bystanders cried.

The sheriff turned to the crowd and let them all look at the pouch. "Leastwise," he said in an undertone, "I'm glad I sent two other riders—and by different trails."

He came back now to the messenger who was still standing there with his rabbit skin bag.

"All right, hombre," he commanded "you vamose good and quick afore we skin you alive."

The effect on that crowd of one rider being captured was considerably less than it might have been.

"If you think you kin bluff us out by any such sign language as this, you've got another think coming, Mr. Skunk. Tell your chief that we're goin' to fight to the last man. And when I say the last man—I don't mean the last of *my* men, but of yours!"

But the Indian did not vamose yet. He extracted another "symbol" as eloquent—more eloquent than the preceding. It was a bowie knife.

The sheriff took it with a snort of disgust. "I know," he said. "You breeds think you kin intimidate us by declaring war with a sheaf of arrows or a knife or some sign like that. Well, we ain't got any use for bowie knives. We're goin' to fight with lead."

By this time others had had a look at that second symbol.

"It's Tim Hardy's knife, chief!" some one cried.

This was another thunderbolt—and figuratively speaking it was ten times louder than the preceding one.

That knife meant that another of Sheriff Hornuff's riders—dispatched to Fort Winfield—had been taken prisoner.

He lifted his fist and swore. For a moment the crowd thought he was going to take out his rage on the hapless and hated messenger then and there. But he contained himself. That is to say, he contained himself to the extent of calling this Indian all the vilest names ever invented.

The messenger was as indomitable as a rock under this whirlwind of abuse. He was like Puma Mesa against which the sands of the desert blew in puffs of cloud.

Several of the sheriff's men surrounded the Indian—one with a riata with the definite intention of dragging him through the street and throwing him bodily out of town, and into Goldpan Creek.

But the breed held up another article—as if protecting himself with a charm.

It was a wide belt of Spanish leather, elaborately tooled.

The sheriff knew without any one divulging the fact this time that the belt belonged to the third and last of his riders.

He looked at it with his eyes popping and staring from under the thick shaggy brows. If the word *Defeat* had been tooled on it instead of that wreath of leaves and flowers, the message of John Powderhorn could not have been any clearer.

Silence fell upon the crowd. Oaths would have been ridiculous, pathetic. They knew perfectly well that John Powderhorn had covered all trails to Fort Winfield.

What to do now?

A whole town of men, women and children were trapped with a horde of Navahos and breeds and renegades a few miles off in the foothills of the Sierra, dancing themselves into a frenzy of bloodlust. And there was no outlet—except for the whole nondescript crowd to make an exodus to the desert. And if they tried any such frantic move as that they would be attacked by the savages—like a sick mole torn to pieces by ants.

Powderhorn's messenger turned to go.

"Wait a minute thar, hombre," the sheriff said in a changed voice. "I've got one more thing to say. You go back and tell your chief I'm tryin' to find the man who killed his nephew. As you specify, the man will most likely drift into town—same as all the other white men who can git here in time. Maybe he's drifted in already. Leastwise, we'll hunt for him—and if luck's with us, we'll have him ready for delivery to-night."

The old sheriff could not resist one parting sally:

“And if we don’t git him, you and your tribe of snivelin’ coyotes is goin’ to be up ag’in the worst fight of your thievin’ throat-cuttin’ lives!”

The Indian turned and shuffled along unaccompanied, down to the south end of town, and through the guarded pass. There he hopped onto his shaggy cayuse and rode away.

If he had any skill in the reading of countenances, he could tell his chief how his message was received.

He could say that they had made a brave attempt, but their faces—he could not help having noticed—were like the faces of bad poker players who have tried to fill a bob-tailed flush—and failed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE BAR-ACE

WHEN Plunk Reverdy had been chased by those Navahos, after witnessing the murder of one of their number, he rode at breakneck speed down the boulder wash of a gulch, to its mouth where it opened into a cañon; then down the steep cañon sides, his mount sliding on haunches over a two hundred yard fall of mesquite and rocks.

An hour or two of hide-and-seek followed among the labyrinth of arroyos, and he managed to get out of sight. He hid all day by leading his horse into the adit of a deserted mine.

At night fall he came out. The arroyos had turned into a monotone of blue under the starlight. The denuded quartz of the cliffs and the wide stretches of alkali reflected the light. It was a mild glow in which one could discern riders as clearly as if it had been day. Riders were in the bottom of the very valley into which the mine opened. No use trying to run that gauntlet now.

Reverdy stayed in hiding all that night and all the following day. Then he came out again.

He estimated that it would take him four hours to reach the nearest ranch—a cow outfit on the

northern rim of the desert. To get out of the desert for a while was the wisest step he could take—at least until there was no more chance of his being mixed up with the activities of that detestable little rat, the horse thief with whom he had consorted the day before.

The trail to that ranch—which ordinarily would have taken, as I say, four hours—took him until dawn. For the danger of being tracked by those Indians necessitated his picking out the narrow gulches, the timbered slopes, and the dark stretches of sage, against which background he could not be seen.

Careful as he was, however, to keep under cover, he found just before morning that he was being trailed.

He saw something moving against the red, starlit façade of the mesa above him. It was moving in the same direction as Reverdy himself. Hard as he looked he could not tell—because of the alternate bands of red rock and deep cliffs—whether this was a single rider or a band.

Nor could he answer this question some time later when he was striking across a sage plain. Looking behind him he caught glimpses now and then of a rider crossing patches of light between the black sage. A band in single file would have given the same impression.

He spurred his horse. But the poor old creature had had some hard usage in that escape from the breeds the day before. He was not only

gaunt with hunger; he was bruised with the killing ride down cañon sides and across rocky washes.

Thus, when within a few miles of the safety of that ranch, Plunk Reverdy heard the hoofbeats of a running horse, not far behind him.

He kept up the flight, as long as he could; then, coming to a big boulder, he drew rein, slid from his saddle and ducked.

The pursuer came on. Yes, it was a single rider.

Plunk Reverdy was bent on firing as soon as he made sure that that rider was an enemy.

And the latter came galloping his horse right along too—without any idea at all of what was in store for him.

Plunk held the nose of his own horse to keep him from neighing a welcome to the other; then waited, all set for a duel.

But now when the pursuer hove into view and presented himself as a perfect target, the man in ambush saw that he was not an Indian.

I believe that Plunk was enormously disappointed. He would have much preferred seeing an Indian there—trailing him for his scalp—than to see that fellow who turned up.

It was in fact no other than the rat-faced, one-eared Slink Bottiler with whom Plunk had made "friends" the day before.

Plunk decided to let the pest ride on. He wanted no more to do with him. He hated the sight of him; he detested the very thought of him.

So he remained where he was—crouched behind that boulder. But thoughtlessly he let loose his horse's nose.

The miserable brute—always to be relied on, as any badly trained fuzz-tail, to do the wrong thing at the right time—proved to be much more friendly than his master.

He neighed a pleasant good morning to the horse galloping past him.

The rider drew rein, whirled about, and leaped to the hostile side of his horse, gun in hand. Then immediately Slink Bottiler sized up the situation:

“Is that you, Plunk? What-all are you hidin’ for, Plunk? Think I’m a Injun? Oh, no. It’s only Slink Bottiler—your pard!”

Plunk was now in full view, the starlight beaming upon him.

It was perhaps lucky for Slink’s feelings that his “pard’s” face could not be seen. The expression was anything but friendly.

“Come on, Plunk! It’s only me. Been trailin’ you for miles. Never hankered for company so much in my life!”

He led his horse over to the boulder—and the two men were companions again. This time with a bond between them—the bond of being fugitives on the plain together.

“As you know, I saw you rustling a horse yesterday,” Plunk said in an incisive tone. It was as if to say: “What do you mean joining up with me again?”

The other took this accusation in an affable way of his own. "Oh, you did, did you? Well, I vum! Ain't that awful?"

"And you plugged one of those breeds. They were in the right, you in the wrong. What if the man you plugged dies? Those Navahos don't forget a thing like that too quickly."

"They're all hoss thieves themselves!" the other retorted.

"That 'll make 'em all the more wild. A bad man being wronged—as he wrongs others—is all the more sensitive. They'll scalp every white hombre they find in the desert."

"Well, they ain't goin' to find me, Plunk. I'm directin' myself to Mule Town. Which I'll stay there till this blows over. And right now I'm headin' as fast as I kin for the Bar-Ace Ranch."

That, unfortunately, was where Plunk was heading. And it was for that reason—the desire to get to cover at the nearest available point—that the two men's trails had met.

They rode along, Plunk in the lead, not so much as looking over his shoulder to answer the general remarks of his companion.

The horse thief fell into a sulk finally.

"Thinks he's too good for *me*, does he?" he grumbled audibly. "Just because I plugged a dirty breed. What harm is there to that? What's pluggin' a breed compared to"—he dropped his voice—"compared to what *he* did? Ain't a man in the desert would hold Plunk Reverdy above

me! So help me God—I'm better than he is! And I give him my hand—as a pal! Now look at him swellin' along there!"

Nevertheless, Slink Bottiler stuck to his companion. It was a great comfort, while riding over that open plain in the dark hour before dawn, to have a rider jogging along with him. Yes, even though it was a rider like Plunk Reverdy.

"And yet most like if they attacked us now," the rat-faced little thief was saying, "he'd leave me to their mercy. Same as he done when ole Jackson Brower and his women folk were attacked."

They reached the Bar-Ace Ranch at sunrise.

A rather inexplicable state of affairs existed there. The place was in a turmoil. Now, a cow ranch at dawn is apt to be a noisy place. The herders are in the corrals with the horses; the kitchen shack is a-clatter with pots and pans; the cows are mooing; the cocks are crowing; and the morning breeze starts the windmill to squeaking.

But added to this the rancher and his wife and family—and all the hands—were bustling about as if the place had caught fire and they were trying to save stuff from the shacks and barns. Exactly like a fire, except that there was neither smoke nor flame.

Upon seeing the two riders coming in from the desert, there was a cessation of activity, a staring, then a recognition.

"Here comes some hombres who'll ride with us," the rancher called to his wife and the other women folk.

"The more the merrier," said a ranch hand—"and the safer!"

"I'll be caterwopously damned if it ain't Plunk Reverdy!" the rancher exclaimed.

"Oh, is that all!" one of the women said. She had reckoned, no doubt, that in that time of grave danger God had sent two new fighting men to help them in their exodus to Mule Town.

But the two fighting men turned out to be a rat-faced little mozo and Plunk Reverdy—a very doubtful accretion of strength.

The rancher turned his tune slightly. The rest of his men went about their business. The last time any of them had seen Plunk he was holding up a gang in the street of Mule Town to cover his escape from a branding.

The branding was forgotten now. But the cause of it was not.

A dead silence attended this event of two ragged hombres from Soda Mesa Desert reaching the portals of civilization.

Then the rat-faced man made bold to say:

"We're starvin!"

"All right, we'll fix you up," said the rancher, who appeared to be a large-hearted hombre in his way. "You look hungry, too." He called to his chow woman. "Ham and eggs for these two gents." He added in a surge of generosity:

"And kill a chicken for 'em. We won't have no use for our chickens from now on."

Plunk seemed to warm at this. He opened out like a flower before a stray, scant, but blessed ray of sunlight.

"What-all's happened, Bigsbee?"

"What-all's happened!" the rancher exclaimed. "I thought you must know. Didn't figure you'd come back to these parts unless you was forced. Look here, ain't you goin' to Mule Town—same's all of us?"

"I'm goin' to Mule Town," Plunk said non-committently. "But what's all this packing up for—and what's this panic in your ranch about?"

"Why, John Powderhorn's on the warpath! A rider from Mule Town came down here a couple of hours ago—about four, I reckon—and told us every one's warned to congregate at Mule Town. I'm tryin' to collect my valuables as well as my women folk and get up thar afore this outfit gits wiped offen the face of the earth." He concluded with the same gesture of hospitality. "You kin ride along with us, Plunk."

This was a very significant sort of invitation. It meant in effect that the rancher was not forgetting what Plunk had done, but he was forgiving him—bygones were bygones. One of the most important of the laws of pioneers must be observed: to band together when the Indians were on the warpath.

"I figured you must of caught wind of the

news down there, and was hurryin' into town," the rancher said. "Your cayuses—not to mention yourselves—sure look like you've et up some hard trail."

"We saw some Indians down on the desert rim," Plunk said. "Whether they were Powderhorn's men or not, I don't know."

The horse thief, who had stood somewhat behind Plunk's elbow during this meeting, was glancing apprehensively about. His ghastly face, his little rats eyes, his pointed nose, were the picture of desperation. When the rancher caught his eye he looked to the sand and his Adam's apple worked convulsively.

Finally Reverdy asked: "Why is John Powderhorn on the warpath?"

At this question the horse thief thrust out his hand, touching Plunk on the elbow with a fantastic light gesture—as if flicking off a horsefly.

Reverdy felt in that touch an eloquent desperation—as if all the fear in the horse thief's miserable body were vibrating through these spidery finger tips.

"He's on the warpath," the rancher said, "because some fool white man tried to rustle one of old John's hosses. Got into a scrap with his men and plugged one of 'em—"

"Did he die?" the horse thief asked in a tight, high voice.

"Died a day later."

Reverdy and Slink Bottiler stood looking at

each other. The news which a moment before had concerned them not at all, now loomed in the light of a vital personal import.

The rancher left them and joined his men in one of the corrals.

Slink's lips were blue except where his tobacco stained them. They trembled. The juice ran down over his chin, and he didn't take the trouble to wipe it off. He was the abject picture of guilt and fear.

Reverdy could not help laughing.

"You poor little piece of nothing!" he chuckled. "You sure are in for it—aren't you?"

He turned toward the chowcart. The cook was calling to them. Slink Bottiler followed, his mouth driveling, his head lolling somewhat to his walk, like a sick man's.

They were starved. And Plunk went at the ham and eggs with a relish that he had never known could be enticed by any mundane food. The horse thief could not eat a bite.

He spat his tobacco wad and rolled up his cuffs. He tried a sip of coffee, then chewed off another hunk of tobacco.

"Look here, pard!" he began miserably, "you won't—"

He did not finish. The fat chow woman came in with a plate heaped with flapjacks. She saw by the way that Plunk went at his meal that she would be kept busy.

"Now you boys fall to in a hurry," she said.

"I ain't goin' to fool around in the kitchen when I got to pack my things. We're all gettin' out o' here in five minutes."

This was directed to the inconsequential and miserable Slink—who, as she noticed, was dilatory.

"What ails you?" she snapped. "Set to and finish, man! You want us all to git scalped?"

This seemed to have an effect on Slink—very much as if the old lady had brought a lash down on his neck. He ducked his head and made a pretense of eating.

"I only hope we won't all get killed after we get to Mule Town," the cook said. She seemed to want to talk to the newcomers. Plunk's huge shoulders comforted her in a time of such tribulation. Apparently she had not heard of his past.

"We'll need all you men to fight," she said. "Powderhorn's gettin' his tribes together for to burn down Mule Town."

"He can't do that," Plunk said. "Mule Town's in a good position—if we have a small bunch of men to hold the two passes."

"Yeah? You think so—really, mister?" She was reassured.

"Then Fort Winfield will hear about it. And good night to that whole gang of breeds."

Even Slink Bottiler began to eat, as this comfort was extended.

"Well, anyway," the cook said, "I hope there won't be no gun fight. It'll be too bad to have

any of our boys shot—all because of some miserable hoss thief. John Powderhorn ain't fair. Goin' to kill us all—just because he's got it in for some renegade we don't know nothin' about. And only think, mister"—she was addressing all her remarks to Plunk, who was not listening, whereas she ignored the thief, who was—"only think, Powderhorn allowed the sheriff just a day and a half to git the thief and deliver him up!"

"Deliver him up to what, for hell's sake?" Slink Bottler asked, dropping his knife.

"Deliver him to them Injuns, of course. Powderhorn said that he wouldn't touch the town if they give him his man."

Plunk looked up at this. The rat's eyes of the little fellow across the table were bulging—they were little tiny hideous things popping outward till the whites showed. He was fixing that fearful stare upon Plunk.

The woman hurried back to the kitchen, saying over her beefy shoulder: "Now hurry up, you! If you cain't eat my flapjacks, then go out to the pump and wash your cup and dish."

When she was gone, the rat-faced man reached across with his two scrawny arms. His fingers opened like claws.

"Pard," he whimpered. "You won't tell! You won't, promise me, for God's sake. It was self-defense, pard. You'd of done the same, so help me God! Don't tell! No one else knows! It's only you that can give me up."

"My God, pard, do you know what it means?" They'll give me up to Powderhorn. It means his squaws will torture me! I know! They stick splinters into you—and set 'em to burnin'. That's what they've done before. No, pard! I'll kill myself! They won't get me!"

Plunk was still eating ravenously, with the splendid, soul-satisfying hunger of a strong and conscience-free man.

"Let Mule Town fight him, pard! What good's Mule Town to *you*? Let 'em protect themselves. You just said that. It's a strong town. But I'm a poor, weak hombre. How can I fight a thousand murderous Injuns? It ain't fair. You wouldn't do that to a pard, would you?"

He had been whispering in a desperate, sobbing sort of tone. But he could not help raising his voice now: "Answer me, for God's sake, pard! Quit slobberin' around them eggs!"

Reverdy raised his head. You could hear voices in the next room distinctly. They could have heard Slink Bottiler's desperate petition if he had spoken a whit louder.

"Pard—"

"Shut up!" Plunk said. He listened for a moment to what was going on in the kitchen. One of the ranch women evidently had come in, and the cook was talking to her. Without doubt that ranch hand, whoever she was, spoke purposely loud enough for Plunk to hear. For she said:

"Who do you mean—that big hombre—the

one with the brown hair? That's Plunk Reverdy. Looks like he kin fight ? Well, I guess he does look thataway—but that's as far as he goes. He's cut out for singin'—not fightn'. They was goin' to brand him in Mule Town for somethin' he done.

"Might as well put him in the chow-wagon with the rest of us women folk. No use lettin' him ride with the men. If they's any fightin' he'll clear out."

Reverdy rose to his feet. His eyes, pallid from so many days in the desert, began to blaze. His face was drawn, gray—gray, that is to say, except for that deep, windburned flush.

Slink Bottiler figured out easily enough just what had happened. And he made use of Plunk's humiliation. It would come in very handy at that time.

"Look here, Plunk," he said rapidly and with a newborn assurance, "you know what Mule Town thinks of you. You heard 'em in there talkin'. I been to Mule Town off and on the past few weeks—and never is your name mentioned without they spit. I ain't found a single man-jack in the whole range yet that would hold out a hand to you—same as I've done."

Reverdy was still standing, staring in a dumb fashion toward that kitchen door. He seemed to have been dazed by the blow. If it had only been a man who had called out that insult from beyond that door!

Slink thought his words were falling upon deaf ears. He too got up and went to Plunk.

"Look here, pard, didn't I take you in while you was in the desert, thirsty and hungry? Me—a poor outcast, same as you? I didn't refuse to give you a hand, did I Plunk? Well, will anybody in Mule Town do as much?"

Reverdy threw him off. It did not take much of a gesture, despite the frenzied hold of those little birdlike claws on his arm.

The horse thief fell back with a weak thump upon the bench. He lay there terrified, gibbering. One word from Plunk and he could see the vision of himself in John Powderhorn's settlement, paying the ordained price.

Plunk was going.

"No, wait, pard—wait, for God's sake! Let me tell you just one thing!" The claws were at work again on the muscular arm.

Slink was pleading for his life, pleading to save himself from torture by the squaws. He spoke as rapidly and frantically as any man could possibly speak.

"Look here, pard—what if you give me up? By doin' that you save Mule Town, don't you? You save 'em from this raid. You save the men that wanted to brand you. You save the townsfolk which spit when they hear your name. Ain't I right, pard? And at the same time you give me up to be tortured—the poor little hombre which give you his hand in the desert!"

There was never in any court of justice a more cunning plea. There was the argument—a weighing of two things in a balance. On the one hand was Mule Town, who had cast him out; on the other, a pitiful, abject thing like a stray dog licking his heels.

A voice from outside was shouting:

“Come on, folks! Git to your mounts! We’re hittin’ the trail!”

The rancher threw open the door of the chow-shack. “Here you, hombres. What-all are you confabbing about in there? Git to your mounts and foller us.”

The horse thief turned, brushed past the rancher, and ran to his cayuse. He leaped aboard and wheeled off for a separate trail. The rancher and Plunk watched him for scarcely half a minute.

“That thar’s a queer hombre,” the rancher said. “He ought to stick with us and help us in case we git into trouble. He looks suspicious to me. Who in tarnation is he?”

Now, Plunk had the impulse at that very moment to leap to his horse and give chase. It was a choice between saving Mule Town, where there were two hundred respectable and worth-while folks, or to save this worthless bit of jetsam.

To save him meant a big battle, lives lost. It meant that Plunk himself would have to ride to the defense of Mule Town—a very disagreeable task. He would be insulted at every turn—probably even while he was fighting his hardest.

It meant that Nell Brower would be imperiled. Plunk did not know that she was at that very moment being held a hostage. He thought she was safe in Mule Town. And Mule Town, according to his roseate and youthful view, could not possibly be taken. It could be defended until Fort Winfield sent help.

Now which was he to do? Save the town from a battle, or save the horse thief from torture? What would any man have done? That I do not know. But I do know that while Plunk was on the very verge of going after that sniveling, terrified coyote, destiny intervened by the merest little quip.

Plunk overheard one of the ranch women saying to her companions: "Come on Jane, Tabby, Lou—all you womenfolk git into the wagon. And tell Plunk Reverdy he kin git in, too."

If that one little sentence with the stinging insult at the end had not been uttered at that moment, Mule Town might have been saved.

The rancher, watching the escaping horse thief, asked again: "Who is that hombre anyway—ridin' off thataway by hisself? Don't you know who he is?"

"He's all right," said Plunk. "A pard of mine. He's just ridin' to a nester's cabin over the hill—to warn a friend."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SACRIFICIAL ALTAR

MULE TOWN sweltered during that long afternoon in a torture of expectancy. There was no more commotion. Every one had been assigned his duty. Guards were posted on watch at the base of the cañon walls to prevent a possible attempt on the part of the invaders to climb down the steep trail.

The town had never been so crowded at any time in its history—not even during the spring round-ups, when the herders came for a rodeo and carousal. And now on this afternoon every one seemed to avoid staying inside any of the shacks or cantinas. They all walked up and down the main street; they sat on the board sidewalks; they stood in groups making prophecies and watching the rim of the gulch.

The flare of shouting and yipping had gone out when the news came about those captured messengers. There was to be no help from Fort Winfield. The fight was between John Powderhorn and Mule Town.

“Powderhorn has two hundred fighters,” the sheriff said. “And that tribe of degen’rit Yumans amounts to eight hundred. We got my

deputies—twenty. They's ten good cowboys from the Bar-J. Fifteen from the Box-L. Ten from the Tumbling Deuce. Twenty from the Consolidated. About twenty miners and such which has gathered in town. The barkeeps and bouncers from the honky-tonks makes twenty more. That gives us almost a hundred fightin' men. One hundred *versus* one thousand. Well, one to ten ain't always a losin' bet."

But even with these figures staring them in the face some of the more riotous and optimistic cowboys, eager for the smell of powder and the siege, began to sing.

They sang to quiet the nerves of the people, just as they used to sing on starlit nights to ward off herd-madness on the range.

Cowboy songs and bar-room ballads were lifted against those hot granite walls, echoing hauntingly in what had been a nerve-racking quiet.

Naturally enough they sang some of the very songs which their one-time favorite minstrel, Plunk Reverdy, had sung for them on riotous Saturday nights.

"I knew a calf-kneed lady
Down at old Pedro's bar,
And though her past was shady,
Her eye was like a star!"

A vision of the author of that song—who was no other than the pariah minstrel—must have been evoked in the minds of the barkeeps, the gamblers, the cowboys, the womenfolk, as they heard the rollicking lines. But no one gave the

author much thought. The town was obsessed now with something else: the coming of John Powderhorn.

Plunk Reverdy's youthful genial face, his fine shoulders swinging as he stroked his banjo, his melodious barytone appeared in a momentary memory perhaps to every mind.

But then Reverdy came in the flesh!

They saw him following in the wake of a few horsemen, a chow-wagon from an outfit down there on the desert rim. A pathetic and lonely figure he was riding apart from the rest of the outfit, coming in to town for the first time since that day when they had tried to brand him.

He heard the strains of his own song being sung by a group of herders. It must have given him a very peculiar thrill.

What could he have thought as those rows of people on the board sidewalks stared at him, nudging one another, pretending not to see? He most certainly thought of the old days when he sang that song for them to dance. They needed a dancing tune like that now. For every face was anxious, the women were pale, one white-haired ranch wife was crying as she kept two children by her knee.

Plunk would have liked to sing that song the way he used to sing it. He would have liked to find his banjo again, and keep those cowboys in time and tune. It was a good song, it was a happy song.

But of course this means of helping them was not to be considered for a moment. He had come to fight; he had come to be stared at with surprised and accusing glances; he had come to be flayed by the same old whip.

"Plunk's moseyed back here where he kin be safe as usual," said a raucous-voiced woman.

He rode on at the tail end of the outfit he had joined that morning. He would not stay in that street long. He wanted to find Nell Brower—then he would stay in the background.

The song stopped abruptly, for the herders who sang it, recognized its author. The chord of attempted close harmony went flat and was lost.

The idea of singing a song of *his writing* at a time like this! They should have been singing the songs of brave men. War songs, "Yankee Doodle," "Tenting To-night."

And when they stopped singing, Reverdy saw Mule Town in a guise which he had never dreamed of before. It was crowded—and the crowd was dumb. He had not supposed that so many ranchers could possibly have come to town with only a day's notice. He had not supposed that so many women and children and old men lived on that range. It was a hapless, anxious-faced mob. And they all looked at him as if to say: "We need fighting men to-day—not you."

But Reverdy gave no thought to this reception.

His mind was awirl with something else. He saw that woman with the two little tots crying; he saw an old man, waiting with a bundle of his earthly possessions, seated on the edge of the board sidewalk; he saw the little kids who had asked him to sing that day—the kids who had not understood his disgrace.

He saw a Mexican woman wailing, and looking at him with dry terrified eyes; he saw old Augustina the palmist with her ragged phrenological charts rolled up, her bandana of beads and card packs, her withered hands pecking at each other, her eyes imploring the heavens to save her poor withered old carcass. Augustina knew that the gods had forsaken Mule Town.

“Plunk’s comin’ to do some *fightin’*,” said a woman.

He overheard this. It was a dum-dum bullet, calculated to spread and break bone and fester.

But it did not wound him. He might have turned to that woman and said: “I had a chance some few hours ago to save this pesky town. But I didn’t. I wanted to see you all destroyed for the way you’ve destroyed me.”

That was what he might have announced to the whole dumb, frightened mob.

But the one thought that obsessed him was this:

“What have I done? What have I done? I saved a sniveling desert rat—and sacrificed all these children!”

Remorse gripped him, shook him, worked into his veins like a violent acid. He felt like a changed man. He felt that their insults and accusing glances were justified—but pitifully insufficient for the crime he had committed. He would be punished for this. He felt the punishment coming; he expected it. It hovered over him every step his horse took, as he shambled along past those doomed people.

He prayed. His lips moved. He tried not to look at the kids. He prayed almost audibly. They might have thought the desert had made him crazy during those days of torture he had been through. He clutched at his breast. He looked up at the cañon rim. He looked up at the hot sky—as if imploring some power to come down and punish him.

“To save a filthy horse thief—I sacrificed them!”

But no! That was too hideous. No good or power in the universe would allow such a travesty of justice! He would fight like a maniac; they would all fight; they would win!

As if to reassure his own soul with this thought, he called aloud to some one in the street. It was an old rancher who had pretended not to see him.

“I figure we can last out, Skeeter, till the regulars get here.”

The man turned upon him—and sneered, as if he knew the whole truth:

“The regulars! No such luck! You’ll have

to fight, Reverdy. Too bad. The riders we sent to Fort Winfield was all scalped or took prisoner."

Reverdy stared as if he were looking at a ghost. There was no possibility of that old rancher understanding why his words had so affected the youth. Reverdy felt of a sudden that his punishment was coming. A sentence was about to be pronounced upon him. He was standing in the presence of an inexorable and merciless judge. He had committed a crime against heaven itself!

Unable to utter a word, he turned his horse and headed directly for the sheriff's office.

The rancher watched him a moment, then said to the bystanders:

"Did you see that hombre's face?"

"It turned gray," said one.

"I saw yaller in his eyes," said another.

"His lips were like slag—losing all shape."

"Just as I thought! He's more plumb scairt than any man, woman or kid in this whole town."

Old Sheriff Hornuff was in his office in excited conference with some of his deputies.

The appearance of Plunk Reverdy at the doorway caused as abrupt a cessation of sound as it had a few moments before during the singing of "The Calf-Kneed Lady."

The sheriff peered under his thick brows at the newcomer, and the cleverest mind-reader in the world could not have told what he was thinking. The stocky little sheriff was a queer man, a harsh

judge, a calm man, a sphinx. He had under his wing a whole range of helpless people.

There was a chance that the women and children over whom he had reigned for years would be massacred by Indians under his very eyes. In short it was not a time to waste much thinking over the advent of this discarded renegade from Soda Mesa Desert.

Yet the sheriff cut short a momentous palaver with his deputies. He stared at the desert-scarred youth, and then made that customary gesture of his—putting the end of his long gray mustache between his lips. He bit it once more. Then:

"Plunk, my boy, I been wishin' you'd come back."

They all waited. One or two deputies grunted. What use could they have for a man like Plunk now?

"We just been estimatin' how much power John Powderhorn really has. They's a story goin' about that he got a holt on a machine gun somewheres or other. Wherever that machine gun's set up—that's where I'm going to post you."

Some one laughed.

An old deputy said: "Did you come back for to fight, Reverdy?"

"Did you come in here and bust up our meetin' for to offer your services as a sharp-shooter?" another asked.

"Leave him have his say," the sheriff interrupted.

"I'd like to see you alone for just one minute, chief," Reverdy said.

Hornuff motioned his men out of the room. It was a peculiar procedure. The idea of paying any attention to Reverdy at a time like this!

They were alone. Plunk spoke quickly:

"Chief, you're busy, and I can't take your time telling you about my affairs. All I want to say is this: I want to fight to save this town. And I see you want to give me a chance. I was riding through the street, going straight to the Rex Hotel to ask for Nell Brower—because I wanted to see her first and tell her not to be afraid.

"But then I heard that your riders to Fort Winfield are all captured. That changes everything, chief, as you well know. I thought there'd only be a little gunfighting, holding those renegades off until the regulars came. But it looks serious now. We can't beat 'em without a troop from Winfield—you believe that?"

The sheriff nodded abstractedly. He was thinking about something else.

"Chief, I want you to let me try to get to Fort Winfield."

Hornuff looked up. Then he shook his head. "The trails are covered. You couldn't make it. I want you here. No use sacrificing any more of my fighting men. You'd be killed—or what's worse, taken prisoner same's the other three."

"But I want to risk it, chief. I know the trails. I can hide in the gulches if I see any of Powder-

horn's men. I'll get there—so help me God!"

Hornuff studied him carefully. Then he shook his head as before. "It would take you several days—travelin' that-away. By that time the fight would be over. You're going to fight a machine gun, Plunk. I've been wanting for the last month to see you square yourself. And here's your chance. Whether you're what this town thinks you are or not, *I don't know*. But luck's with you, Plunk, because you're goin' to have a chance!"

Reverdy made a gesture of desperation. "Luck! Good God! I'm the unluckiest man in the world. Luck's against me—from the start. God himself's against me, chief! He's judging me for what I've done. Don't ask me to explain now. It would take too long—and you're in a hurry. Just take my word for it. I'm responsible for this whole hideous thing that's come on this innocent town!"

The sheriff was glaring from under his shaggy brows. What had happened to Plunk Reverdy anyway? The young fellow was excited abnormally, talking as if drunk—or rather drugged, his eyes dilated, flaming.

Hornuff studied him for a moment as if he could not make head or tail out of what he had just said.

"I'd admire for you to explain something, Plunk. Have you talked to any townsfolk since coming from the desert?"

"Just an old rancher—who told me about your riders being caught."

"No one else that knows what's been goin' on?"

"No one. I joined the Bar-Ace outfit this morning—"

"Didn't they know what-all's been happenin'?"

"Just that Powderhorn's on the warpath."

"Nothin' else? Nothin' that concerns you?"

"What do you mean by that—'concerns me'?"

"You say you was ridin' to the hotel for to find out where Nell Brower's at?"

"Naturally. She's the first one I wanted to see. To comfort her—you know what I mean, chief."

"Sure I do. But you ain't heard what's happened to Nell Brower."

Plunk felt that the sentence which destiny was to pass upon him for his crime was about to descend.

"What the hell are you talking about, chief! Nothing's happened to that little girl—to little Nellie—Nellie Brower, chief, what are you saying, for God's sake!"

"She went down to the desert to find you. Some of Powderhorn's coyotes picked her up—"

"Picked her up! What do you mean, chief! You're crazy! What're you trying to say!" Reverdy was shouting now. He took the stocky

little sheriff by the shoulders as if to shake him.

"They caught her—and rustled her off to their settlement at Desolation," Hornuff explained, as if trying to placate a crazed man. "All as I kin do is to tell you the truth, Plunk. The gal's as good as lost. Leave go diggin' your fingers into my shoulders—are you daft!"

The clutch weakened abruptly. All the blood had drained from Reverdy's face. He understood now an overwhelming assurance. He was paying the price for sacrificing that town.

He had sacrificed *Nell Brower*!

"No, no! It can't be, chief! Some one's sagebrushed you. I can't believe it! Those Indians wouldn't touch a white woman—you know that!"

"I know Powderhorn's Indians," said the other. "They're keeping her for hostage. Powderhorn sent a messenger saying that he'd release her only when we delivered up his man for him."

"The damned thieving coyotes!" Reverdy fairly screamed. "I'll kill every manjack of 'em. I'll fight the whole tribe! I'll wipe it off the face of the earth, so help me God!"

Old Sheriff Hornuff in the many years of his regime had never seen a face so gray, a pair of eyes so flaming. The boy's rage was like a mania.

Hornuff reached out his arms as if to hold him, but he seemed afraid to touch him. "Where do you think you're going, Plunk. You ain't going

to the settlement! They's hundreds of 'em—most like likkerin' up and doin' their war-dance. What-all good is it sacrificin' your life to 'em? You stay here and help us! ”

He made bold to catch Plunk by the arm just as the latter banged open the door. Outside in the hallway a group of deputies had gathered, hearing the loud talking, the scuffling.

“Get this hombre a drink, men. He's goin' daft. Hold him. Don't let him go. Wants to throw his life away—without so much as firin' a shot. And he's the crackest marksman we've got in town! ”

Reverdy found himself tussling with six men. Most probably he could have knocked them all over, if he had taken that course. Instead the voice of old Sheriff Hornuff seemed to have touched a chord somewhere within his frantic heaving breast.

“Don't sacrifice your life—without you gain somethin', Plunk! That won't git the gal! ”

Reverdy stood with his arms held by those deputies, his eyes staring like smoldering fires in the sunken sockets. He was a figure that would give any man a qualm.

“Sacrifice my life, chief? ” he said breathlessly. “Why not, chief? Tell me that. What good's this rotten, murderous life of mine? I'm worse than them all—worse than Powderhorn and every cutthroat breed in his gang. I've sacrificed all the kids—the womenfolk—the helpless old

coots in this town. What's the odds if I sacrifice one more—a measly, sniveling, worthless life like my own? ”

“All right, Plunk,” Hornuff said in his calm and soothing way. “I’ll leave you do it. But I want to see you bump off a dozen renegades first. You kin do it, if you stay here and help us fight. If you go out alone to their settlement, you won’t git a chanst to pot one of ’em.”

They thought that this had its effect on Reverdy. The men found that he made no more attempt to resist their hold. He shoved them back, as if to show he had strength enough to stand on his own feet. The hallway by this time was crowded. It was crowded as far as the door to the street—and there on the steps and on the sidewalk a big crowd had gathered.

“You calm down, Plunk, and work off some of your revenge ag’in them renegades by helpin’ us stop this raid.”

Reverdy answered with a softness and assurance that startled them all:

“There’s not going to be any raid, chief.”

There was a dead silence, although the crowd was large, and some of the men had been trying to elbow their way farther into the hall.

Upon hearing this, Sheriff Hornuff threw up his hands—as if in defeat. No use arguing any further. The boy was locoed. That was all there was to it.

“Chief—you believe what I’m telling you.

There's not going to be any raid. Because—" his coolness was cutting; his voice pierced that be-fogged and stuffy hallway like a knife—"because I'm going to see John Powderhorn."

"A lot of good that will do," Hornuff snorted. He was disgusted now with the whole business. He had other things to attend to besides placating a sun-struck boy. "Powderhorn won't listen to no argument from *you*. He won't listen to me—or to God or to nobody. If he don't git his man, he'll raid us. That's as good as finished already." The sheriff withdrew to his office door.

"If he gets his man—" Reverdy began—

The sheriff turned back. He peered fiercely under the shaggy brows. "You mean, Plunk, that you kin find the man for us—the hoss thief which murdered Powderhorn's nephew?"

Reverdy shook his head. He knew perfectly well that in the few hours remaining before the raid there was no chance of finding that man. That horse thief knew what was coming to him if he were caught. He knew that Powderhorn's squaws could keep a man alive for hours, while they plied him with the tortures of hell.

"No, chief, I don't have to find him," Reverdy said. "I've got him already. He's here before you." He did not address himself to the crowd, but looked Sheriff Hornuff fearlessly in the eye.

There was no tremor in Reverdy's voice. His lie was perfectly told:

"I mysef am the man, chief."

Reverdy cast a glance across the dumfounded faces of the crowd. He saw that they were all stricken, incapable of action.

"Better brush it up, chief," he said. "No time to lose if you want to save the kids in this town from massacre. Take me to Powderhorn now. And see that Nell Brower gets back safe."

CHAPTER XXX

POWWOW

THE sun setting between two mesas cast a band of red light against the broken down shacks and wickiups of Desolation.

Below the town on the lower slope of the Sierra a horde of Yumans worked themselves into a murderous frenzy, strutting, pounding their feet, waving their arms, lowering and lifting their heads, yipping in a war-dance.

Desolation itself remained aloof on a jutting lip of the sierra. It was quieter up there. But another ritual just as barbaric was about to be performed.

John Powderhorn and some of his kinsmen, before leading the horde below on the raid, intended to heat their blood lust by the burial ceremony. Powderhorn's murdered nephew had been painted and decked for his journey to the next world.

It was now that a Navaho spy came riding as fast as his horse could climb that zigzag trail toward the settlement.

Once on the lip of the mesa he galloped his mount into the heart of Desolation toward the funeral fires, the mêlée of dogs and children and

squaws, the medicine men, the mourning, peyote-eating warriors.

"They are coming," he said to John Powderhorn in their native tongue, "the sheriff and a posse and a prisoner. The murderer is being brought to you, Big Chief. And your kinsman is avenged."

Now this news was received with considerable disappointment.

I refer to all except Old John. The big chief, dreaming of loot and of scalping the whole population of a paleface village, had not forgotten about the murderer of his kinsman. Revenge was his first passion. Not all the burning towns of the world would have given him quite the perfect satisfaction he wanted. If he could only get hands on the right man!

He was at that moment gazing upon the clay-painted face of the nephew who had been his favorite and bravest warrior. He had it in his heart to make this burial ceremony a memorable one.

John Powderhorn was far less a fighter than a medicine man. He evoked a picture of the murderer being burned alive at one of those funeral fires and going into the next world groveling and whimpering while his victim went in the glory of a Navaho burial.

He turned from the contemplation of that clay. His face was grim with an age-old hate. His voice was tortured with a yearning that must be

satisfied. The blood in his eyeballs was the blood of ancient savage ancestors—passionate, primitive, cruel.

He was told that white men were riding up the trail with a white flag waving.

He sent his snake-priests and heralds to meet them. "Let the sheriff and his men and his prisoner come. Let them be told that Powderhorn would never violate their white flag."

While he waited for the posse to be led into town, Powderhorn summoned the breeds who had been on the scene when the fight between his nephew and the horse thief took place.

He asked craftily if there was any one among them who could recognize this man.

One of them who had given chase after the horse thief had committed the murder, spoke up:

He knew that the thief was a thin man with a growth of beard, and with a face as red as though painted with powdered clay—like the dead at Powderhorn's. But that fight over the horse had happened in the wink of an eye. Powderhorn's kinsman lay wounded. His companions were blind with rage. When they gave chase they saw only the back of his head. This was all explained to the big chief.

"What will it matter?" an old snake-priest counseled in Navaho. "If they deliver a scapegoat you may torture him anyway as you torture the effigy of an enemy. And thus you will be avenged."

Powderhorn nodded his leonine head. These were perhaps wise words. But in his philosophy of life and death and revenge and justice there was a peculiar mixture of practicality. He would give up the raid only on condition that they deliver the right man to him.

The white men came.

Powderhorn received them in the one littered street. He stood in front of the paling of stakes. On one side was his shack; on the other some squaws were stringing baked cornmeal cakes on yucca fibre, tanning hides, weaving papoose baskets. Always slaving—even at a time like this.

Closer to the chief were four of his war-priests.

The white men, mounted, were led through the rubbish heap of the main street toward this scene.

There were six of them. Four reined and waited. Two others rode directly to the corral where the big chief stood glowering at them.

Powderhorn could not tell which one was the prisoner, for no one was bound. The little sheriff with the gray mustache and gray brows, and the rusty star catching the final ray of sunset, was in the lead.

Old John's lips were pursed in a grin as the sheriff dismounted with one of the men and came toward him.

Hornuff's mustache had turned grayer during the last day and a half. It had taken on almost the silvery color of his hair.

The giant Indian and the little sheriff faced

each other. It was like a terrier facing a Great Dane. But the terrier seemed to know instinctively that all danger was past.

Powderhorn looked at the prisoner—a man of his own height. He looked at him with eagle eyes, his mouth still pursed in a wrinkled smile. It was a smile that might have been interpreted as genial or sardonic or incredulous, or immeasurably cruel. No man could tell.

Now, this ancient renegade of the desert had a far-reaching wisdom of mankind—particularly of Navahos and Mexicans and breeds. He also knew a thing or two about white men. But there was one thing he did not know and would not believe even if he had been told: that a white man will give up his life for a woman.

That was a legend as ridiculous to John Powderhorn as, let us say, the legend of a shaman turning himself into a mole would be to a white man. In his transactions with horse dealers he had never had occasion to test such a fantastic character trait. White men lied, white men stole, white men broke their promises, white men got drunk, white men yearned to get rich, white men prayed to their own gods; and, furthermore, white men fought for their mates and their young, just as a Navaho might.

And a white man might offer himself up to save a friend—if that friend were a man—just as a Navaho might. But as for his offering himself to be tortured in order to save a *woman*—no!

Thus was John Powderhorn's wisdom found wanting. Thus was he cheated. He did not ask Plunk Reverdy point-blank whether he were the guilty man; for he believed that Reverdy would, of course, naturally say no.

Now if the big chief had asked that question everything would have gone along smoothly. He would have been surprised, but he would have also been satisfied. For Reverdy would have said: "Yes, I am the man you want."

Instead of asking him, however, he asked one of his own Navahos: "Is this the man you saw fighting with my kinsman?"

The Navaho shrugged his shoulders and then declared that this man had the burned skin, the thin gaunt face, the stubble of hair that had marked the slayer; but beyond that there was no proof.

Powderhorn looked at the tall youth standing without any bonds, facing him. He appeared brave. Powderhorn was pleased with the way he comported himself in the shadow of torture. In this way white men and Indians were alike—so thought John Powderhorn. He had seen white men hanged; and the only ones who showed signs of great fear were the executioners. And it was the case now. No one in that group of Navahos and horsemen seemed so brave as the prisoner.

"Hi-yu-skookum! I take this hombre," said Powderhorn.

"Let's get out of here pronto, chief," one of

the posse urged. "Them breeds down in the valley are drinkin' theirselves crazy."

"Does this mean peace, John?" Hornuff asked.

"It means peace," said the old renegade. "No like warpath. But the Yumans who come at my call are plum cultus braves. They are in hell-damn frenzy. You keep your ranchers and your muckers out of the open trails bime-by. Otherwise"—he described an imaginary halo around his head with his crooked forefinger—"scalp 'em heap pronto."

"I'm thankin' you, John. When you say you'll keep the peace, I know you mean what you say. Your word's as good as any bond ever given to a man. And I'll do the same. I'm sorry, John, that this business came up. It waren't nothin' of my doin'. As you say, you yourself have men under you which you can't keep a tight rein on. Well, it's the same here. This murder of your nephew wasn't caused by me or by Mule Town. It was the mischief of one hombre."

Powderhorn nodded his head. He was satisfied. His prisoner would follow his noble victim and whimper and grovel at his heels as they crossed into the next world.

"Let's get out. Come on, sheriff. It's goin' to be a risky ride gettin' home."

But Hornuff was not yet through.

He caught Reverdy gazing at him with a mute and eloquent fire in his eyes.

"How about that white woman you're holdin' as hostage, John?" Hornuff asked.

"What white woman?" the big chief rejoined.

"Some of your men picked her up in the desert edge and rustled her off. You sent a messenger to me, sayin'—"

"Hootch-la!" the big chief exclaimed. "I remember. Hell-damn nuisance. What do I want of white squaw. I punished the brave who pull-em this trick. Take off clothes—whip with horse-whip like hell. If you take her away this white squaw, John Powderhorn say 'Much oblige.'" He scratched his head in a moment's perplexity. "What the hell did we do with that squaw?"

He was reminded by one of his henchmen that she had been stuck in a closet of his "office."

Sure enough! Old John remembered now. A nuisance. Clattered about in there with those bottles and kicked and cried all afternoon. Let the snake-priests get her out.

"You take squaw away pronto. Damn much oblige. I give you two cuitans—for gift."

The girl was brought. Nothing further was done about the cuitans, and Hornuff and his men were diplomatic enough to overlook the promise. Powderhorn was as hard to part from his horses as a miser from his gold.

Nell Brower was wan, white-faced, terrified. They had to help her as they brought her down to the corral where the powwow had taken place. But when she saw Reverdy she broke away from

her renegade escorts and flew into his arms.

For a fraction of a moment she was shocked to see that Reverdy paid no attention to her. Then she realized that something of great import was happening. There was Sheriff Hornuff, and some of the deputies mounted. On the ground stood John Powderhorn. On either side of Reverdy were Navaho medicine men.

"What has happened?" she cried.

Sheriff Hornuff explained in a word. "The raid is not to take place. We have brought John his man."

She threw her arms about Reverdy's neck.

"What does this mean? Tell me, Sheriff Hornuff, and you"—she cried to the deputies—"what have you done?"

"You better come along, gal. Plunk Reverdy killed old John's nephew. That's the story. You're free."

"He did not kill him! It's a lie! It's the blackest lie any one ever told. He came here to save me! I know it! I was thinking all the time that if he heard I was a prisoner he would come. And here he is."

"Come on, gal," old Hornuff pleaded. "Here's your horse. Same one as he had. If you don't want to start trouble—and get this raid worked up all over again—you come along."

"I won't come along! I'll stay here unless Plunk comes with us, too. It's all a frame-up, and you men know what you're doing. Plunk's

innocent of this, before God! I know it. And I'll die with him before riding with you cowards." She turned to the inscrutable but somewhat impatient Navaho chief. "Can't *you* see what's happened? They've brought you the wrong man. And he's consenting so I can go free."

Here she touched upon the one point that old John Powderhorn would not believe. These white men might have brought Reverdy as a scapegoat to save the town; but to save a woman—that was preposterous. The sheriff and his men would not exchange a powerful young man for a woman. And the man would not exchange himself for her either.

John Powderhorn showed his impatience. He had other matters to occupy his mind—the burial of his nephew, the torture of the prisoner.

"Take her away," he said, waving his huge arm with its talisman of skunk skin. "Tie her in saddle like basket papoose. No like powwow when we sing burial chant."

Nell Brower clung with all the strength of her body to Reverdy.

It was the first time Reverdy had felt her embrace. He did not return it, but as he stood there indifferent, indomitable, it was the same as if the two were locked in the first and last bond of love. It was a moment that could stand for eternity. Plunk Reverdy felt that he had won his game against that damnable god of luck that had been hounding him.

"Go on, girl," he said quietly. "You go back to the town. You forget me."

"Forget you!" she cried. "After what you've done!"

"I've done nothing. I told the sheriff to bring me here. It's my fault—this whole raid. I'm paying the right price."

"Your fault!" she repeated. "I don't believe you, Plunk."

"Take her away!" Powderhorn ordered.

Two of the braves tore the girl from her lover. Two others led Reverdy off.

The sheriff was the last to leave the scene of the powwow.

He watched his men taking the girl down the trail; he watched John Powderhorn walking, proud but moody, toward the paling of stakes where his nephew was to be buried.

He watched the breeds and braves taking the condemned man over to where the funeral fires were sending up skeins of smoke into the thin darkening twilight.

Sheriff Hornuff had wanted to shake Plunk Reverdy's hand. He had wanted to say something—something in the way of thanks for this confession of his which had saved Sheriff Hornuff's people. But what could he say to a hoss thief?

He sat in his saddle for a brief moment, chewing at his mustache. Yes—it may be hard to believe, but that mustache had silvered during the

last day and night. He was saying to himself:

“I’d like to have told the boy that I wisht he’d cleared himself of bein’ a coward afore dyin’ this-away. If he’d only had time to find that thar hoss with the stars onto its face! Then this here death would be a good death—and we’d remember Plunk!”

He turned to go—with something of a sigh of relief. “Well, I reckon bein’ he’s just turned out a hoss thief we won’t none of us figure that he gave up his life—in a manner of speaking—as a sacrifice.”

They could see little of Desolation now—for the desert twilight lasted only a few moments. They saw merely the dark shoulder of the sierra, and the burial fires gleaming like the eyes of wolves.

CHAPTER XXXI

POWDERHORN'S JUDGMENT

ONE of those Navahos who had been present when the horse thief shot Powderhorn's nephew seemed particularly anxious to have the prisoner delivered to the squaws. The scene of that skirmish in the cañon, and the unjust death, was still vivid in his mind. He had kept every detail of it alive since the fatal hour, by recounting it to his companions and to that most sympathetic of all his listeners, Old John himself.

He suggested to his chief to order the prisoner's torture to commence. The longer the torture, the more complete would be John Powderhorn's revenge.

Powderhorn chewed thoughtfully. There was plenty of time now. His allied tribe, the Yumans, assembled in the lower cañon, had been eagerly awaiting his command to hit the trail for Mule Town. This urgency existed no longer. The raid was to be canceled.

Powderhorn turned abruptly from a general with military affairs pressing upon his wrinkled brows, to a shaman. In this latter capacity—as I have already noted—he was truly himself.

His ancient blood was heated by a passion

which outlasts youth—the passion for revenge.

He looked upon Reverdy with the conflicting emotions of a hungry boy who wants to eat his cake and keep it. He looked upon him with a burning curiosity—a desire to have complete assurance that he was the murderer.

Yes, they must take him immediately beyond the paling for torture. And while they broke the metate-bowl which the dead man used in life—as was the Navaho custom—they would break the body of his murderer.

What a perfect revenge!

And yet in order that it be perfect there must be no doubt.

That white woman clinging to this man and crying that he had come to save her was playing some peculiar sort of trick. Old John did not understand it. He did not believe her. What a ridiculous notion! To be tortured so that a squaw might live!

The big chief was musing, chewing steadily, never for once taking his eagle eyes from his prisoner. How he would gloat over that torture! And yet that white woman had said enough to bewilder Old John. She had been a nuisance from the start.

There he had his man—a man that was worth all the gold and all the horses of the world to him, and at this triumphant moment the memory of a crazy white squaw clinging to his neck came up before him and spoiled it all.

One of the medicine men counseled him: "None of our kinsmen who saw the murderer can identify him, except imperfectly. There can be no further proof. Torture him and enjoy your revenge."

No! There must be one proof—one test. When Old John was satisfied—then the torture could begin. He called to one of his *mozos* to bring two *cayuses*.

The big chief then waved his hand so that the crowd of squaws and children and renegades widened to a circle about the corral. At one end was the paling of sticks about the burial place. Against it the fires threw the shadows of dogs—like big, flickering gargoyles nosing about the place of the dead.

Against the adobe walls or unpainted boards of the shacks and *xacallis* the fires threw the waddling forms of squaws. One could see the broad outlines of their waists, their heads growing without necks from beefy shoulders. The dusk had erased the riotous colors from their crazy quilt skirts. There seemed to be here a large gray assembly multiplied by shadows, touched only at times by a flicker of the mesquite fires. The red was gone from the sky.

Two Indian ponies were brought—shaggy, range-fed mustangs.

"Saddle him, one *cayuse*," the big chief said. This was accomplished.

"Bridle him."

He turned to the prisoner. "You will take lariat, hombre, and mount him cayuse."

The crowd watched in a dumb reverence. Their big chief did things which had a significance beyond the ken of mortals. He was a cloud swallower. No one questioned. They worshiped.

Wondering what it was all about, but keenly alive to the dignity of this peculiar ritual, Reverdy mounted the horse.

John Powderhorn then took up a stone and cast it at the other cayuse, which buck-jumped and ran around the widened circle.

The big chief motioned to his prisoner. "Rope him cayuse."

Reverdy obeyed. He hitched the end of his lariat to the saddlehorn, coiled the slack and started opening a large loop.

The whirl of the lass-rope spinning in the air as he widened his loop got the other cayuse galloping. The squaws and children, the assembled snake priests and braves backed away.

The lariat sailed out, singing down under the forelegs of the horse. It hit the ground with a flip, making a perfect trap, and the victim stepped smack into it.

Not knowing how well his own mount was trained for this stock work, Reverdy took a tight hold of the horse's mouth, making him rear.

The sudden movement was enough to help the other horse trip himself on the tightened noose and fall.

John Powderhorn, when he saw this, nodded his leonine head. His lips, cross-hatched with a hundred wrinkles, were puckered with that same smile—a smile either of geniality or satanic cruelty. One could not tell which. He motioned to the rider, and told him to dismount.

Plunk Reverdy stood before him and waited for the sentence. If he had not been afraid before, he had good cause now. He was standing before a human volcano—a volcano that had no outlet of steam or vapor; a volcano that contained all the pent-up fury of many ages.

Reverdy could see the boiling blood now in those lips, the high cheekbones, those inscrutable eyes. Could he ever forget those eyes circled with countless wrinkles, darkened with mottled spots, gleaming like lava.

"I make him test. John Powderhorn is satisfied!" the big chief said.

His men and his squaws hung upon the last sentence. The big chief was infallible.

He stretched his hands toward Reverdy as if with an uncontrollable desire to rend him to pieces.

The braves set up a shout, but the old giant shook his head.

Then he gave his sentence, speaking to Reverdy in a soft tone that vibrated with baffled rage and a baffled revenge.

"No! Some one play hell-damn trick on you. *You are not the man!*"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TRAIL OF ETERNITY

THERE was a silence as the mozo was taking away the two cayuses, a silence broken only by the yelp of a dog, and the chanting of the horde of Indians in the cañon.

Reverdy's heart leaped. He tried to speak, but could not. There was a murmur among the more bloodthirsty of the braves. They had been cheated of their raid—and now they were cheated of their prisoner. But this murmur died down as suddenly as it had come. Could any mortal dare to raise a voice against the judgment of this great shaman?

The aged giant turned to his henchmen.

Again the palefaces—so said Powderhorn—had cheated. You look into a horse's mouth to tell his age. If a man tells you a horse is three years old and you find the teeth are triangular and the tongue projects over the bars, then he has lied. So, John Powderhorn explained, he knew they had lied to him about this man.

His breeds and kinsmen caught fire at this. Powderhorn raised his hand and made them stand back. He then went on in his incisive Navaho sentences.

He said they had described many times over how the man who killed his nephew roped a horse. They had said that he took hitches, or dallies as they call them out there, around his saddlehorn—as they do with the rawhide lariats in Nevada. And they described how he had reins that were not split. They said that he did this even though he had a small saddlehorn—such as the cowboys of Arizona use—which are no good for dallies.

By that John Powderhorn knew that the horse thief could rope a horse in no other way. But this prisoner comes and ropes his horse—as any tie-man of this country. This prisoner was from Arizona, but the man Old John wanted was from Nevada—or perhaps California or Oregon.

The white men had cheated! That was the shout of the braves: Kill him, anyway! Slay all white men! Burn their ranches! Destroy their town! Steal their cattle! Kill their squaws!

Powderhorn shook his head and stopped them again. The quarrel was with those who sent this hapless prisoner, giving out that he was the criminal. *They* must be punished!

“As for you,” the big chief said, turning upon his prisoner, “they mak’ scapegoat out of you. Should be heapwise if you vamoise. Savvy? John Powderhorn is just, but he no like joker. Git out. Let night put ’em on shadows like Navaho blanket and hide you. My braves are wild cuitans champing. They scalp you pronto. Savvy? I count three and you vamoise.”

He pointed to the darkness between two shacks, evidently with the advice that Reverdy disappear on the instant. If he could find his way from that hiding place without being scalped, so much the better. But Powderhorn would make no promises.

"You ready, hombre? Hotch-la! One!" he started to count ceremoniously. "Two!" Reverdy crouched ready to run. "Three!"

Reverdy was gone.

He sped between the two shacks and came out in the starlight of a back corral. He covered this corral in leaps and bounds, passed a shack, a wickiup, a kitchen heap. And abruptly found his path blocked.

He was on a ledge looking out upon vast depths of starlit space. Beneath him the adobe fell away to a black gulch.

When he turned back in search of another avenue of escape, the scene had changed.

It was now pitch dark. A planet or two on the horizon, that had been glowing since sundown, were about to set. The fires around the grave, heaped with mesquite and piñon knots, were sending up a heavy curtain of smoke.

In the few moments that had elapsed since John Powderhorn had declared Reverdy innocent, a din of many sounds and voices had come up.

A little way off medicine men with their fiber bags and grizzly claw necklaces and witch bundles, were howling and beating drums. The whole tribe took up the war chant. And from the gulch

below it was answered by their allies—the Yumans. Dogs were yelping with excitement as the braves mounted and galloped out of the village for the cañon trail.

Far down in the gulch the Yuman tribe, riding off on the warpath, gave vent to barbaric calls so that it seemed as if the arroyos were alive with coyotes. The sharp, staccato howls were thrown back and forth in the deep barrancas. Thus all the rocks of the Sierra joined with the witch drums and the braves in proclaiming their hate.

Reverdy saw that he had failed. Mule Town, with its force of scarcely more than a hundred men, was like a corral of calves before this horde of killers.

To avoid a certain massacre Plunk Reverdy had done all that any mortal could do. He had offered his life, but John Powderhorn did not want it. Reverdy was forgotten, cast out again by these renegade cutthroats, as he had been cast out by his own town. He was no good as a fighter, no good as a prisoner, no good even to kill!

He stood there in the dim, smoky air of Desolation, forgotten by all the world excepting only a sniffing dog.

His one hope was to get back by some miraculous ruse to Mule Town, where he could help in the fighting that was now sure to come.

It was hard to think what with that yelping of braves in the gulch just below; with that chanting of medicine men; and that infernal throbbing

of flat drums, growing each moment louder, more excruciating, more deafening.

Momentarily his chances of life, he knew well enough, were growing slimmer. The braves were eating peyote, heating their murder lust to a frenzy with the drug. Reverdy resolved at least to remain in hiding until that funeral was over and old Powderhorn followed his warriors toward Mule Town.

Meanwhile, the thunder of the flat drums increased. The mourners danced, throwing up their heads, ducking them, pounding the earth with their feet, waving their frantic arms. Reverdy was close enough so that he could see their eyes gleaming in the firelight, dilated with peyote.

From where he hid he could see the face of the dead man. The light flickering upon the earthen paint of his features made an effect as if he were changing expression, smiling and frowning alternately. A strange fancy gripped Reverdy: The dead man was smiling because he knew John Powderhorn would wreak a terrible revenge. And he was frowning because his real murderer had not yet been found.

As Reverdy watched, fascinated at this grotesque and hideous thing, the fires grew dim. They were heaping stuff on them to be burned. All that had remained of the sacred feast was piled on the mesquite flames, so that the dogs which were about would not pollute the food by eating it.

The dead man was frowning now. He sat there, propped upright against a mound of earth, his rifle across his lap, his bowie knife in hand. A witch doctor who must have been a hundred years old held the metate high up above a rock slab. This—as I have said—was the custom. The metate had been used by the dead in life. The witch doctor hurled it crashing against the granite.

The ritual, except for one last rite, was completed. The songs had been chanted; the drums had been beaten; the witch doctors had sung: "Let the enemeies of our chief be as this man is!"

The dead was prepared for the great journey.

One thing only he needed now for the other world: a horse.

Thus, according to the Navaho custom, a horse was brought to the paling, accoutered with the dead man's saddle and bridle. A medicine man stood by with a sawed-off shotgun to put the beast to death.

The man with the red earth on his face sat immovable, rigid, looking toward the setting planets, while they brought him the mount on which he was to ride the Trail of Those Above.

This was the moment—while the medicine man loaded his gun—that Plunk Reverdy chose to make his break for liberty. The mourners were heavily drugged with peyote; the squaws were far off in the darkness obsessed with the final and most dramatic act of an Indian burial—the sacrificing of the horse.

In a few moments more John Powderhorn would be armed and mounted. While his nephew was sped, likewise armed and mounted, toward the trails of eternity, John Powderhorn would go out on the warpath to avenge his death.

But it so happened that Reverdy saw the horse they brought to be shot. He saw it merely out of the corner of his eye, as he turned to flee.

And then he paused as if a net had been cast over him.

Until now that barbaric scene of Navahos silhouetted in the dim smoke, powwowing and howling, had meant nothing to him. He was waiting breathlessly for the first chance to save his life. But now the scene had changed.

He was an integral part of it. It was the climactic scene not only of that dead warrior's history, but likewise of his own.

Every detail was burned into his memory: the masked medicine men, the painted, yipping braves, the circle of squaws in the background scowling through their strands of matted hair; the painted face of the dead, vivacious in dancing shadows; the paling of stakes; the giant, white-maned Powderhorn—and that horse!

It was an old cayuse, a very ordinary old cayuse with an ugly shape. John Powderhorn, wily horse-trader that he was, had begrudged the dead warrior a fine mount. Here was a shaggy bag of hide and bones which had been found no doubt lost in some wild arroyo of the desert. A disrep-

utable old fellow with hard but splintered hoofs and torn skin and tangled mane!

But he was gentle! So gentle in fact that right now he was rubbing his nose affectionately on the metallic shoulder bands of the brave who held the bridle!

And Reverdy, gazing fiercely under contracted brows, could see white dots on the nose and face of that cayuse—*like stars against the blood bay hide!*

Yes, Reverdy was held in that scene in a net which all the gods of the Navahos—the Hot Hand, the Cold Hand, the Good Mind, the Bad Mind—could not have broken!

CHAPTER XXXIII

SLINK BOTTILER

OUT of a deserted mine shaft not far from Mule Town there emerged into the starlight a red-haired animal with pointed features and rat's eyes. It was a man—but that's the last member of the animal kingdom you would have guessed him to be.

He did not walk erect like a man. He crawled—like an apprehensive prairie dog out of his hole—and lay upon the waste dump at the mine's mouth, looking down into the cañon below.

The lights of Mule Town winked merrily. The sound of mechanical pianos, guitars, and of the rollicking "Texas Tommy" drifted up—purified of discords and raucousness by remoteness. There came merely a drifting melody of syncope and joy.

Slink Bottiler, the horse thief—for this was the animal I am writing of—was bewildered. How could Mule Town have plunged itself into the ecstatic throes of a Saturday night carousal when John Powderhorn was going to descend upon it—on that very night—with a thousand peyote-maddened savages?

Slink waited, a miserable and terrified being.

He was afraid of being found by Powderhorn's men—up there on the rim of that mesa, alone. He was afraid of taking refuge—as all other whites had done—in Mule Town.

For he was under the definite impression that Plunk Reverdy had gone to Mule Town with the rest. And Plunk Reverdy was the one man in the world who knew that Slink was the murderer of Powderhorn's kinsman. No, he could not go down to Mule Town. He must stay up there in hiding, cudgeling his brains about this mystery.

Something had happened. What it was he could not for the life of him guess. It bewildered and mystified him. And the more he was mystified, the more fear-ridden he became.

But something came to pass that put a temporary end to his misery.

A troop of riders—employees of the United Jack silver mine—were coming up the trail toward Puma Mesa.

Slink Bottiler waited with a beating heart while they approached the waste dump. They rode past in close single file, their horses' heads lapped on the quarters of the horses in front. The men were silent, wary. Evidently they did not partake of Mule Town's hilarity and abandon.

Slink was more mystified than ever. How was it these men were riding away from Mule Town—when a raid was promised for that very night. The raid in fact was already overdue. Any minute there would be a horde of Indians sprouting

up miraculously from mesquite clump and crevice and boulder wash.

Before the last rider passed the waste dump on which he was flattened, Bottiler's curiosity and fear worked together, enticing him out.

He saw that they were all white men. And he saw likewise that not one of them was the man he dreaded most—Plunk Reverdy.

He peered over the dump and called weakly.

The men whirled their horses about with the unity of a trained troop of cavalry. Slink was covered with half a dozen guns.

"Don't shoot, gents, I beg yer! It's only me—a poor white man caught up here—and too all-fired scairt to crawl any further."

"What-all do you think you're doin' out here alone, pard?" the leader of the gang said. "You better git back to Mule Town. Sheriff Hornuff warned us agin leavin' Mule Town for a couple days more."

"Then how come you-all are leavin'?" And how come Mule Town's so all-fired happy celebratin' and sousin'?"

"I reckon that you ain't heard what's happened in Mule Town durin' the last couple hours?" the man said.

"I been stewin' and sweatin' in this mine not only the last couple hours—but the last couple months—leastwise that's how long it seemed to me. When I come in from the desert—a prospector I am—heard as how Powderhorn was on

the warpath and was goin' to raid the town unless they delivered up to him some murderous coot which killed his nephew."

"Well, you heard everything all right," said the spokesman of the riders. "And it's all over."

"They ain't goin' to be a raid," said another, "but Sheriff Hornuff said Powderhorn's men might pick off stragglers in the desert. That's why we're ridin' in a bunch up to the U. J. mine for to get some more of our valuables. Then we're ridin' back. And everyone's stayin' in town a few days longer till this rumpus quiets down."

"And you better shag back too, hombre," another rider advised. "Come on men, let's go."

Slink had been trying to speak, but words would not come. He was scratching his rat's nest of a head. Now he managed to stammer:

"What are you sayin' gents—about this here raid bein' called off? Powderhorn wouldn't call off no raid—so I've heard—unless he found his man."

"Well, he has found his man."

Slink gurgled. "I mean, gents—I mean the yaller-livered hoss thief which shot his nephew. Thought as how John Powderhorn wanted him for to torture him."

"The yaller-livered hoss thief has been turned over to old John," they said. "That's what all the celebratin' is over down there. The town is freed. The sheriff got back after taking the prisoner over to Desolation and givin' him up. He

come back bringin' Nell Brower—and they're all safe in town."

"Come on, let's go," said one of the men, "and you shag down there to town, hombre, quick as you kin. Don't be trailin' around alone for a day or two."

"Wait, gents, wait, for God's sake! Are you all daft? Who is the man that was giv' up to Powderhorn?"

"Yaller-livered is right!" one called back to him. "It was the yallerest livered coyote ever breathed—Plunk Reverdy—that's who it was."

"Plunk Reverdy!" Slink exclaimed voicelessly. He saw the men riding off, and he screamed out, running down the waste dump after them. "Gents—wait! Reverdy was giv' up? The sheriff's back? No raid? Leave me get this straight—"

But they were galloping along now, and he could just hear the last one call back to him: "Go on to Mule Town, hombre. The danger ain't past yet!"

He cried out to them again, running along the trail. But it was dark; the trail turned. They were out of sight and out of hearing.

Slink Bottiler went down into a deep arroyo where he had hidden his horse.

He was tortured with many violent emotions and fears. Amazement and a great incomprehensible sense of relief mingled in his little pigeon chest.

The sheriff had been to Powderhorn's settlement and had returned! An innocent man had been taken as a sacrifice. Reverdy had expiated the sin of this fear-ridden sniveling man, Bottiler!

Very well then, what was Slink to worry about? Why be torn to tatters with fear and apprehension? Why bake himself to death in those arroyos and mine shafts hiding from drunken Indians when he could go down to Mule Town and get drunk himself? Plunk Reverdy was no longer in Mule Town—and Plunk was the only man in the world who knew that he—Slink—was the guilty man.

Mule Town was safe and free. It was a place to celebrate. And Slink Bottiler was free. Some one had been sacrificed for him. Was he the one to object? Oh, no! A merciful Providence had worked in mysterious ways. Slink would not question. He did not care how Reverdy happened to be the scapegoat. All he cared was that he was free.

Nor did his conscience trouble him in the slightest. He did not have a conscience.

He mounted his horse, whistled a tune, and took the trail down toward the festive town.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MOUNT FOR THE DEAD

AT the burial scene off there in the foothills of the Sierra, an incident took place which was over in thirty or forty seconds—no more. Yet to describe it would take as many pages. And there would be as many versions—each one different.

For no man or squaw or child who saw that thing happen would have described it in the same way. Each saw something different, and each would have disbelieved the testimony of all the others.

Let me put it in a few words, which at best are puny and inadequate:

A band of Indians, some with eyes dilated by peyote; some with brains poisoned by that religious intoxicant, jimson weed; some others sodden with jackass brandy, were howling and chanting songs, and beating drums. Their forms were dimly visible in the smoke of high-heaped mesquite fires.

A dead man, painted red, armed, facing the west, sat erect in indifference and scorn. His flickering face laughed at these things which were of the finite world, for he himself was a denizen of Eternity.

Close at hand were the squaws, the children, the dogs. There was much yelping, beating of breasts, pounding of the earth, booming of drums.

An old horse with a whitish speckled face stood at the burying place. A medicine man stood behind him with a gun.

A white man—hiding in the dark—jumped at one last slender chance to save his life, to save what was more precious than his life—his name!

And then it happened:

There was a scuffle in the darkness—a scuffle heard by no one—unless perhaps by a few nude children who were closest—and who had no understanding of what it was about.

A medicine man fell to the ground, hit upon the chin by a fist which emerged from the darkness between two shacks. He was yanked into the dark. Something emerged with the mask and the buffalo horns which the medicine man had worn.

This devil leaped into the center of the company. Smoke blinded everyone. Some were already purblind with jimson weed; others could see with abnormal clarity because of the sacred peyote plant they had eaten and worshiped. But these who could see best were slow of understanding because of the drug.

A devil appeared among them.

The squaws knew this devil was the white man, and they shrieked.

But to what avail? The devil had leaped upon

the sacrificial horse. The mount reared and bucked. But the merciless hold on his mouth, the pressure against his haunches and girth by the rider's knee and heel swung him about. His bucks were frantic straightaway leaps toward the cliff edge.

There was the mysterious and unfathomable space of darkness beyond—the breath of clear air coming upward—which had given the human being pause.

But that mattered little. The human being was on the horse's back, leading him to destruction. It was the human being that this horse hated above all things else in life. The horse had tried to kill him before. He would succeed now.

The beast leaped into the air and came down on his forefeet with a smashing jolt. *That* would send his rider catapulting over his head into the black gulch.

But the rider was still there! A fierce yank at the tender mouth made him rear again. The horse stood upright on the cliff edge, forestriking into the air. Behind was the yelping of dogs, the screaming of squaws, a gunshot, the booming voice of John Powderhorn—the throwing of stones, a shot singeing the horse's withers, another cutting the skin of his croup—and that was all.

Horse and rider went out into the air and then rolled down the sand embankment.

High up yonder on the ledge, John Powder-

horn and his men were reeling off to their guns and mounts.

Totally oblivious of the doom hanging over it, Mule Town basked in the abandon of a desert saturnalia.

Everything had ended satisfactorily; the horse thief probably was dead by now; the town was free; John Powderhorn, grizzled and merciless avenger, was appeased.

But Sheriff Hornuff did not join his men at the Rex cantina in a spirit of triumph. For some reason or other he felt as if he had suffered a terrific defeat. He did not understand why.

But Plunk Reverdy's face—grim and stoical in the presence of death—kept appearing before him. The sheriff—try as hard as he could to avoid it—kept thinking that Reverdy's defeat was his own defeat. Hornuff had refused to condemn the boy. And now that confession showed that all along the wise old Sheriff Hornuff had been wrong.

Well, he must forget! But how could he?

The sound of the boy's name was tossed back and forth from barkeep to croupier, to dance girl, to miner, without ceasing. That hapless and fury-hounded youth had bobbed up again as the chief actor of Mule Town's history.

"So it was Plunk Reverdy!"

"So it was him that brought this danger on us!"

"Well, we wouldn't believed it a month ago—till he pulled that trick down in Soda Mesa, desertin' Brower's family. But now we understand! Well! Well! Well!"

There was considerable satisfaction. It was the act of God. The boy was headed to damnation when he first showed the white feather. And he had certainly arrived where he was headed for!

The barkeep of the Rex summoned the crowd.

"Gents and ladies! I've got somethin' here which from now on will have a historical value. I kep' it—because I wanted to throw it in Plunk's face when I met him. But I never got the chance—"

"I'd like to see *you* throw anythin' in his face!" Sheriff Hornuff grumbled. Plunk's face—as I have said—was vivid in his mind's eye. It was calm, gaunt, sad—hardened with a courage which Hornuff in his three score years had never seen equaled.

"It's Plunk Reverdy's famous banjo!" said the barkeep, holding the instrument up and striking a chord. It made a pathetic and jangling cry, for none of the strings was in tune.

"Who wants it? What's that worth?" some one jeered.

"Let's burn it," said another.

"Yes—burn it in celebration of what's happened."

"A good idee," admitted the barkeep. "Them

was my sentiments till I thought it all over. Now Plunk used to leave this banjo in my keepin' when he came to town. I've kep' it for him many a time. One of the deputies which went down to Sody Mesa with you, sheriff, found it with Brower's effects—you remember when you-all went down to rescue Brower. Plunk, they said, threw it away. Forgot it. Never looked for it since—"

"I should hope not!" cried one of the gang. "If he'd struck another chord onto it we'd of plugged him then and there!"

"Still and all gents!" said the barkeep, who had something of a business head, "I ain't goin' to give it up to be burned for nothin'. This here instrument should ought to be put into a museum, bein' it's a relic of this scare we've just had.

"They keep things like these in Tucson—showin' the frontier life of this here country. We could stick a tag onto it specifyin' 'Plunk Reverdy's Famous Banjo. This same Reverdy is the one that was give up to the Injuns for to save the town from a raid.'" Again he struck a jangling chord and the banjo cried out as if hurt cruelly.

The veterinary, who was the idol-breaker of the town, spoke up: "Auction it off, Joe! Might some one will want it for a souvenir of these hard times. I myself hereby offers two bits for same. And when you put it in my hand I'll set fire to it out in the street—and we'll all sing Plunk's songs. And make a vow that never agin will his name be mentioned in this town."

"I offer four bits," said the barber. "I want to hang it up in my shop. And tell my clients about these here adventures of the last few days."

"I'll offer six bits," said the sheriff.

"What'll you do with it, chief?"

The sheriff pulled at his mustache. He did not exactly know. He was obsessed with the vision of Plunk's face. He would not keep the banjo in sight; no. But, on the other hand, he did not want it desecrated.

"I'll git it out'n the way with proper rites and ceremonies," he said.

"One dollar!" said the veterinary. "I want to show this town a thing or two about what we think of young men which is yaller. I want every man, woman and child in this town to see it burn so's they'll carry the picture with 'em from now on."

"Two dollars!" said the croupier. "I want to hang that thar instrument on the back of some coot's chair when I'm playin' ag'in him so's it'll stop his luck. For they ain't no talisman in the world that has such hard luck witched into it as this same banjo."

This was considered a marvelous deduction.

Two old gamblers cried out at once: "A hundred bucks!"

"A hundred and fifty!" cried the sheriff.

"Three hundred!" a gambler shouted.

"Now, wait, gents!" Sheriff Hornuff said, holding up his hand. "I've got somethin' to say."

The barkeep swore. Right at the time that he had started the bids soaring—for a worthless, scratched, lop-sided, warped banjo, Hornuff had to butt in. He threw the thing down on the bar disgustedly, and the vibration sent the strings singing again in a soft and doleful wail.

The crowd too was impatient. But since Sheriff Hornuff had averted the destruction of the town by his visit to Powderhorn they were disposed to regard him as a hero. They listened.

“Gents, that banjo means somethin’ to me. It’s a queer feelin’ it gives me. But I ain’t goin’ to stand for it bein’ laughed at nor burned nor busted, nor spit on. It’s Plunk Reverdy hisself! No, you won’t understand that. Neither do I. But it’s the only thing we got left here to remember him by.”

There was gasps. *Remember him!* Why remember a man like Reverdy?

“All his other effects has been scattered around the desert. He used to bunk over to Mrs. Jenkins’s roomin’ shack. But she kicked him out with everythin’ he possessed. Then we tried to brand him—and he had to trail it without any of his old things. The Mexes, I reckon, stole ’em. This here banjo is what’s left of Plunk Reverdy.”

“Then the quicker we burn it the better!” they all cried.

“All right, gents. You kin do that—after you listen to what I have to say:

“I took Reverdy to Powderhorn’s town—on

Reverdy's own confession! Now, I figured he confessed because he was goin' crazy with his conscience—seein' all these women folk and kids about to be slaughtered. But after I seen him standin' up there in one of Powderhorn's corrals—facin' the murderous old chief without battin' a eye—why I knew then that his conscience weren't botherin' him a bit.

"Gents, you won't believe me, but durin' the ride home, and the last couple hours, I been gettin' more and more plumb sartin that Reverdy wasn't the horse thief at all! That he had nothin' to do with the murder of Powderhorn's kin—"

Some one boomed.

The sheriff put up his hand. He was short—and all that could be seen of him in that crowd at the bar was the peak of his sombrero. But you could hear his voice—and it had an immeasurable weight of conviction:

"Gents—Plunk gave himself up—for to save Nell Brower from them renegades!"

This was like a thunderbolt. It dazed everybody. They did not believe. And they did not want to believe. But the idea was so preposterous that for the moment no one could find tongue to deny it.

No one, that is to say, except a little rat-eyed man sitting far off in one of the booths, hungrily munching a tamale.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sheriff—and gents. But you-all ain't got the facts of the case straight."

Everyone turned a look at this offensive and oily-voiced stranger. They saw a short man with matted red hair step out into the hot light of one of the lamps. He darted his beady eyes from face to face, he sniffed apprehensively of the smoky air.

He blinked as if he had crawled out of a hole and the light dazzled and frightened him. He was like a coyote caught in a chicken yard—and unable to find a direction of escape.

"Who the hell are you, hombre?" Sheriff Hornuff demanded.

"Slink Bottler, I am," said the stranger. "And I was down in Sody Mesa Desert with Plunk Reverdy when it all happened."

"That's true, chief," said one of the cowmen of the Bar Ace ranch. "He come up to our outfit with Plunk at sunrise this mo'nin'."

"A couple days ago at dawn I was on the rim of a cañon lookin' down—and I seen this Plunk Reverdy ropin' a hoss. Then I seen some renegade Injuns jump out of the chaparral for to object to his proceedings. Then I seen him shoot one of 'em."

Hornuff twisted his whitened mustache and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. Why—he asked himself—did he persist in believing Plunk Reverdy's blood was good blood, when there was repeated evidence to the contrary? But the sheriff was in the habit of weighing evidence carefully. It was not a definite thing. It was not a matter

of black and white. It could be gray. It could tend toward being white evidence, or else toward being black evidence. It depended largely upon where it came from.

In this case it came from a man whose hair was matted thick on his temples. It came from a man with furtive eyes. It came from an excited, fear-ridden tongue.

Hornuff focused his gaze upon the stranger and scorched him.

"What am I offered, gents?" the barkeep was saying. "What am I offered for his here banjo? Three hundred dollars! Good! But it's worth more. It's the only remainin' relic of a historical and notorious hooman. Not a hooman, but a devil! Goin' at three hundred bucks!

"Why, gents, this is the same banjo the devil made us dance by. It was played by a devil who pretty near got us all wiped offen the earth. The pipe of the Pied Piper leadin' a lot of kids to destruction won't be more famous in future years than this here instrument! It's got a whole museum of historical facks backed off the map! Goin' the second time at three hundred!"

He banged on the mahogany. Every one turned again to his absorbing game. The man with rat's eyes and matted red hair was forgotten. His news had not been news. They had known what he had to say long before he said it.

Only one person was watching him now. And that was the suspicious and fierce-eyed little sher-

iff, biting his mustache. He was like some predatory animal licking its chops.

"Goin', goin'—for the second time—"

The doors of the cantina swung open. Two men rushed in.

They were two of those riders whom Slink Bottler had met up there on the trail to the Union Jack Mine.

"Chief, they're coming!" one of them shouted. "We got to the rim of Puma Mesa and seen 'em. They's a horde of 'em—"

"Horde of what—"

"Injuns. Powderhorn's double-crost you! We almost got to the mine when we seen big lines of 'em deployed over the white sand plains! We raced like hell back to warn you-all, chief!"

"They're comin' like ants from every direction, chief!"

The voices of the two men rang out in a dead silence—except for the beating of horses' hoofs in the street and the sound of people running on the board sidewalk.

Sheriff Hornuff changed instantly from a quizical and suspicious old man who had been intently studying the facial expression of a puny tramp, into his capacity of general.

"All right, everybody," he said calmly. "The time's come."

He turned and went to the street. The whole cantina emptied out after him.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DESTROYER COMES

MULE TOWN was situated in the bottom of a deep cañon. Gold Pan Creek ran through it in flood time, leaving a dry wash of bowlders that meandered through the cañon bed, emerging on the south side between two cliffs. This was a narrow gulch with walls a hundred or two hundred feet of granite rising sheer, and leaving a mere ribbon of starlit sky above.

To this gateway—which could only be entered by an enemy by repeated onslaughts and great loss of life—Sheriff Hornuff rode with a posse of twenty men.

Old Hornuff had seen a gun fight in this locality some twenty years before, and he knew its value—as well as its vulnerability. Twenty men could hold it against a horde, but the enemy could direct a fire from certain points of the cliff rim.

To be screened from this attack, the defenders were obliged to hide behind bowlders—few in number. That is why Hornuff could not use a big force at this end of town. He posted his twenty men behind bowlders which he knew from experience were safe.

Then he was about to return to town and in-

spect the guard with which he had surrounded it when he heard the echo of hoofbeats, banging up the boulder wash.

"Damned if they ain't already here!" some one called out.

"It's only one hoss," said another.

"Yes, it's only one hoss," said the sheriff. "Leave him git up close. Don't pot him. If it's only one they ain't no harm lettin' him in. Most like it's a refugee."

"Or else Powderhorn's sent us another one of his damned messages!" one of the men suggested.

"Don't reckon it's a time for messages now," said the sheriff. "It's a time for action. Keep your eyes peeled sharp now."

They listened breathlessly. Yes, it was a single rider—if their ears were any judge. It was a tuckered horse, beating heavily upon rock slabs—a weary, uneven, stumbling gait. At times they thought there were many riders because of the echoes hurled between the granite cliffs. But Hornuff's practiced ear reassured them.

Then he came. They saw merely the gaunt form of the rider on an ugly and shaggy horse. It was dark in that cañon. The strip of starlight showed nothing of the thorn-tangled mane of the horse or its ratty tail or lathered bony sides. And the light was too dim to tell whether that looming form was white man or breed or Navaho.

"Who be you, stranger?" a voice called out.

The rider recognized the sheriff's voice. "It's Reverdy," he said.

"Reverdy—what Reverdy—not Plunk for the love of God! What-all's happened?"

"Powderhorn's coming!" Reverdy said. "That's what's happened."

"Then he *is* double-crossin' us!" the men cried.

"He's coming with all his breeds and a whole tribe of murderous and drugged Yumans, chief," Reverdy said. "Are your men posted?"

"They are. We heard the news afore this. I've posted my men all around the town. All we kin do now is to wait. But how come the old devil went back on his word? And how come he let *you* outen his clutch?"

"Because he found out I wasn't the right man," Plunk replied.

"He found out *what*?" Hornuff cried.

"He made me rope a horse—and saw that I didn't rope him the way the horse thief that killed his nephew roped him. That settled it. You can't fool old John."

"And you cain't fool me," Hornuff declared. "I know'd it all along, Plunk!"

"Then I had to get a mount to come home on," Reverdy explained, "so I picked on this ton of dynamite. Rode him over a cliff. Fought with him hand and foot. Rolled down into a mesquite patch with him and was pretty near crushed.

"Cinched up the saddle, which had been torn off, and then started in to bust him good and

proper. I stuck on to a sun-fishing, high-rolling crater till I was halfway home. And he'd still be fighting me if he had any strength left."

"Kick your heels into him, and come on," the sheriff ordered. "I've got work for you."

He issued a command to the men behind the boulders:

"If any of you birds git picked off, one of you ride to town pronto and let me know. We cain't afford to lose a single man at this end. Come on, Plunk. Use your heels!"

"Can't use my heels on this outlaw," Plunk said. "You don't know what horse this is I'm riding, chief. Wait till you get some light on his face—and then you'll find out."

The sheriff wheeled and rode on toward town. What did he care about Plunk's horse? He had a town to save. His mind was awchirl with vital plans, with matters of life and death.

Reverdy hastened after him, and just as they climbed up out of the stream bed and were heading toward the town's street something happened up there on the cañon rim far above them.

There came a series of sharp winking flashes. It looked as if a constellation of tiny stars were rising above the horizon, only to be blotted out by an intense darkness. The serene blue light of the real stars remained as before, the only light from rim to rim.

But with that line of white winking dots there had come also the rattling echo of carbines. The

cliffs hurled the sound of the fusillade back, and then back again, until the deathlike silence of Goldpan Cañon changed to a deafening clatter.

Reverdy looked up there to the cliff edge and saw black silhouettes dimly formed against the grayish-blue of the starlight.

From the bed of the gulch where Reverdy and the sheriff had left the sentinels to guard the pass, there came sharper white lines of fire. Just above them a black body, incredibly small and shapeless, fell from the face of the cliff. It was a noiseless descent through empty space, a submersion in black shadows, then a thud and a shower of dislodged stones.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"YOU TWO WILL MEET!"

WITHIN the space of perhaps twenty minutes the Rex cantina underwent a miraculous transformation.

It had been a scene of triumphant festivity. The mechanical piano had banged out its rollicking "O Susanna" and "Wait for the Wagon"; miners and herders had thumped the Texas Tommy about the deeply grooved floors; the sheriff had been there with his deputies sousing and cheering. That scene has already been chronicled.

But now all the men able to bear arms were gone to the outskirts of the town. A few were held in reserve, their horses in a group champing in the dust before the sheriff's office. The cantina itself, being the largest shack of the town, had become a place of refuge for the women and children and old men.

Of the latter there were only two. Any man under eighty was eligible for the draft.

All the children of the town—both Mexicans and Americans—were there, giving an innocent imitation of the excitement and joy which had gripped their elders but a short while before.

Their mothers and aunts and grandmothers—Mexicans and Americans and the few Indian breeds of the town—were huddled together in terrified groups, in corners and at windows.

Through the windows, they could see the silhouettes of Indian horsemen riding in endless procession along the rim of the cañon. They could hear their weird yipping drifting down like the call of a wolf pack; they could see the winking lights of their guns, and hear the sharp echoes prolonged between the granite cliffs. And far down in the chasm of Goldpan Gulch they could hear the continual duelling of the twenty men Hornuff had posted there to keep Powderhorn's horde from riding into the valley.

They watched together with hearts beating as one, arm in arm; mothers with their babes before them on the green baize of the gaming tables; or their children squatted in the sawdust of the floor and clinging to their skirts. Brown, flat-faced Mexican women were side by side with white girls, in a sudden perfect sisterhood.

There was one character in that scene whom I must not overlook. He was inconspicuous and miserable, probably as terrified as any one else there—too terrified to go out in the street, where he ran the danger of being drafted to fight.

If the dance hall had not been so crowded, and the attention of every one directed toward the windows instead of inside, some one might have asked this character why he was not using that

six-gun of his—which he carried on his thigh—in the defense of the town.

He wandered furtively about among the women, wishing no doubt for a drink to moisten his nervous and parched mouth. But the barkeep had closed up and disappeared.

The rat-eyed little fellow then wandered over to the lunch stand in the corner, where a Chinese customarily held forth, dispensing hot dogs and chile con carne. This was likewise closed up, but the rat-eyed man managed to filch some cheese. It seemed to be his proper diet.

He nibbled rapidly, and munched with a peculiar movement of his jaws and lips which also suggested a rodent.

Having stayed his hunger to this small extent, he turned about and went into the circle of light under the fan of a hanging lantern. He had hidden from the light thus far, but this time he was forced into it, in order to avoid elbowing his way through two groups of women.

But some one saw him.

He found himself facing a dark-haired girl who had woebegone eyes and an anxious, care-worn tracing face.

She was nothing to be afraid of, but Slink Bottiler—which, needless to say, was the name of this character—shifted his eyes.

She spoke to him, facing him directly, for he was about her height.

"Are you the man who was with Plunk Rev-

erdy down in the desert?" she asked calmly.

His eyes darted furtively up to hers then away again. If any of those women in that dance hall had been watching the faces of these two, they would have been treated to a surprising and dramatic contrast.

The face of the man was red, ill-fated, fear-ridden. It winced at every sound of gunfire far off there on the cañon rim. It winced when a Mexican woman started wailing. It winced when an old grandmother asked frantically: "When will the sheriff be back? He's been down thar in the gulch half an hour. Didn't take but twenty men. 'Tain't enough. Powderhorn will break through with a thousand Injuns! Why don't Hornuff come back like he said?"

Still there continued the distant fusillade, the innocent bawling of a child; some horsemen clattering down the street outside; the Mexican mother wailing. Then periodically all the refugees of the cantina plunged in a dumb and terrified silence.

"Sure I was with him," the little man replied.

He glanced to her face again. He could not understand the placid courage there. Why was she not afraid?

"You say you saw him—roping a horse—fighting some renegade Indians?"

"Sure I saw him. Would I lie about it? Do I look like I'd lie? Why should I lie about him?"

"Yes, why should you lie? That is what I want to know. It must mean something to tell a lie like that."

There were the two faces under that hot light—one like a rat startled at the tread of feet; the other white, lovely, with the calmness of an intense despair.

"Look here!" the man whimpered. "Why talk about Plunk Reverdy? Ain't he dead by now? Ain't he forgotten? We got enough to worry about without bringin' him back in the argument. An hour or two from now—and we'll all be forgotten."

"Yes—half an hour from now," the girl smiled. She was like an image carved in old ivory, immovable. "Half an hour from now when we're dead—you'll meet Plunk Reverdy again—in the other world."

His face changed—as if a cloud had passed over a desert pool of reddish gyp water.

But the cloud passed quickly. He was not afraid of the other world just yet—even though he expected to get there shortly. The danger of Powderhorn and his savages was too tangible. Slink Bottiler was thinking of a bowie knife ripping off his scalp. That was worse than the fear of a hypothetical hell.

"You mean Plunk will git me because I told on him—and didn't keep his crime secret?"

"I mean—because you lied," the girl said.

Now he had given her no cause to believe that

he lied. And he would have given her no cause—even if they had stood there in the center of the dance floor all evening and discussed the matter from every angle. Slink Bottiler was far too clever for that.

But the girl knew he lied. And she had only one clew. Her faith in Reverdy. Reverdy was not a horse thief. That was the first premise. All the witnesses in the world, all the Bibles in the world, all the most irrefutable logic in the world, could not have made her believe that Reverdy was a horse thief.

Now this man Bottiler, having lied, was lying for a reason. If Reverdy and he were both on the scene during the murder, then the one who committed the crime was Bottiler. That was a perfect deduction.

The call of the wolf-pack on the cañon rim drifted down—as if a sudden puff of wind had swelled it.

Slink Bottiler cringed and turned away, headed for a darker place.

The girl caught him by the arm.

“Leave me go, damn you!” he whispered. “What have I done to *you*! What are you diggin’ up Reverdy for, anyway? He was only a yaller-livered skunk when he was alive. And what’s his name worth now? Leave me go—and forget him.”

But she did not let him go. Some of the women looked up and saw them tussling. They did

not hear what she said — for she spoke softly — with a venomous coolness:

“Now that he’s dead, you’re brave enough to blacken his name with your foul lies! There’s no punishment in this life terrible enough to serve you right. I only hope that some time, somewhere you two will meet!”

She let him go, and he slunk off hurriedly. For a moment the refugees had cast him a glance. But to see a ragged wisp of a tramp in the center of the dance floor tussling with one of the girls — well, that was an enthralling sight.

He disappeared in the darkness of one of the booths, and they had only the memory of a furtive thing, laughing inaudibly and showing yellow gums.

It was at that moment that Plunk Reverdy, following the sheriff from Goldpan Gulch, rode up to the door of the cantina.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE PARADISE OF MULE TOWN

WHEN they heard that Sheriff Hornuff had come back, a crowd of women went to the street and ambushed him with frantic questions:

“Anything new, chief? Are they safe — those men down there? What are the Injuns goin’ to do? Are they goin’ to climb down the cliffs? Can they break through the gorge? Any one hit yet? Is my John all right? Is my Pete safe? How come Plunk Reverdy’s back? Will we all git killed, chief?”

The one who was first to reach the door was Nellie Brower. But it was not to see the sheriff.

Upon first hearing that Reverdy had come back riding with Sheriff Hornuff, she could not believe. Her heart leaped, she was dazed. What was this miracle that had happened? Her lover returned from what every one thought was the dead? It could not be. But her daze was only momentary. She turned about and sped across the sawdust-strewn dance floor. She was the first one out in the starlight.

The firing down in the gulch and the winking lights and distant cracking of gunfire on the cañon rim seemed to have redoubled. The riders

whom the sheriff had left in town were galloping down the street to meet him. And then came that fusillade of questions from terror-stricken mothers and grandmothers.

In that confusion of sight and sound Nell Brower saw the one dominant, commanding figure. He was there seated in his saddle, his horse thrusting its head into a band of yellow light. Nell did not notice the horse. She did not see the white-speckled face, although that was a detail as vital to her life as to the life of her lover. She saw only Reverdy himself sitting there—strangely triumphant, even in this hour of imminent tragedy.

He was supernatural to her, because he had been "tortured to death," and now he had returned to earth—a ghostly looming form.

The anguish in Nell Brower's heart was swept away. She heard no more wailing of Mexican *señoras*, no shouting of commands, no galloping of horsemen this way and that. The crackling of distant gunfire had turned to a melody. Music was vibrant in that desert breeze. The stark gash in the desert's breast, called Goldpan Cañon, had turned to Paradise.

They were not devils up there firing into a caldron of hell; they were angels—all of Powderhorn's men—because they had given back her lover to her!

Reverdy saw her. He heard her cry of joy. He pressed his mount over to the board sidewalk,

reached down with his arm, and lifted her from her feet. She threw her arms about him—and in that kiss the tragedy of his past, the tragedy of the present in which the town was racked, and all fear of any tragedy to come, was wiped away.

Old Sheriff Hornuff was shouting his orders.

“Get into your shacks!” he yelled to the women and children. “Shut up, and clear the streets! No, don’t put the lights out yet ! Ain’t no cause, till Powderhorn gits into the cañon. Then everybody’s to git together in the cantina. Meanwhile, keep that vestibule clear in the Rex Hotel for to tend any one which is hit. They’ll be a few, but don’t worry; and don’t ax fool questions.

“Yes, damn it, Powderhorn’s here and they’s a thousand Indians circumnavigatin’ us, and we’re goin’ to fight like hell. That’s the answer to all your questions.”

He turned to the horsemen he had left in the street as reserve.

“Three of you men shag down to the gulch. And keep behind the bowlders and crawl through mesquite. They’re rainin’ lead on ’em thick and fast.”

He looked back and saw Reverdy and Nell Brower.

“And some one git Plunk a gun—a good clean one. And likewise a fresh mount.”

In rapidly spoken sentences Plunk had told the girl of his acquittal in Powderhorn’s strange court; of Powderhorn’s discovery that he was not

the right man; of his escape and his fight with that outlaw horse.

"And he's going to fight again, this man-killer," he said. "I've felt him gathering steam all the way from Desolation to Goldpan Gulch. I'm holding him in tight—and he's petered out. But when he blows up, all Mule Town's going to see what happened to me that day when I left your granddad and his household to the mercy of those outlaws.

"He'll blow up again—don't worry about that. Maybe not right away; maybe not to-night. But sooner or later he's going to turn into a grizzly bear. And when he rubs his nose on some one's shoulder—watch out!"

The girl drew back. Something had startled her. She let out a voiceless cry, and her face—revealed clearly in the light of one of the windows—was transfixed.

"What's wrong? He's all right. I've got him in hand. The old devil's too tuckered out. He won't hurt you."

But the girl had not thought of the horse. In fact, even while Reverdy was speaking to her, she had been thinking of something else.

She remembered how Slink Bottiler had crawled away—a grin on his face. She had watched him—with a feeling akin to one watching a Gila monster crawling off under a rock.

Then some one had called out that the sheriff and Plunk Reverdy were riding down the street.

Before she had fully realized the meaning of that precious name a vision of Slink Bottiler's face was photographed upon her mind.

The face had paled. Although to say it had paled does not express the actual color transformation which took place. The skin turned yellow—with red splotches left—like the yellowish red of a Gila monster. The lips were drawn tighter, the grin remaining. Nell Brower had never seen a mask so eloquent of surprise and terror. But in her own ecstasy at hearing her lover's name called she had forgotten for the moment this hideous thing.

And now it came up before her—as clearly etched as if it were the living mask. Without any process of logical reasoning, the girl jumped wildly to the conclusion that Slink would make an attempt upon Reverdy's life.

As a matter of fact, her intuitive judgment was sound. Reverdy was the only man who could accuse Bottiler. The latter could kill him with impunity. He could justify his deed by announcing that Reverdy, in escaping from Powderhorn, had escaped the punishment due him—and likewise had brought this horde of Indians upon Mule Town.

Nell saw a furtive figure squeeze through the crowd of women at the cantina door, slink over toward the water trough, raise a gun.

The girl screamed and ran toward the assassin. No one heard that scream. No one knew that

anything had happened. The sheriff was a little way off, giving parting instructions to a detachment of riders. A heated duel was going on in the gulch. A fusillade of continual fire cracked out on both rims of the cañon walls. Horses champed, wheeled, or ran at a loud clip-clop of hoofs down the street.

A shot spurted from behind the trough. It was deafening in comparison to the distant echoes of the raiders. Every one in the street turned to look. It was like a gong startling the race horses in their paddock. That is to say, every one jumped nervously, then waited.

Nell Brower was standing there, partly revealed in a band of yellow lamplight from the Rex cantina door. At her knees was a cringing black figure. A few yards off, Reverdy was clutching at his shoulder. No one could guess what was wrong with him, until he swayed in his saddle, leaned forward over the horse's withers, and then let himself fall limply to the ground.

He stood a moment, reaching for one of the uprights that held the gallery of the Rex shack.

Then the crowd burst out:

"What-all's happening? Reverdy—he's hit!"

"An Injun must of sneaked in, chief!"

"Reverdy's the man they want. Give him up to them without no more fightin'!"

"Reverdy—he escaped, and they've followed him."

"He's the cause of it all. Give him up! Save

the town! He's no good! How'd he git back, anyway?"

Slink Bottiler, on his knees in the darkness behind the water trough, must have understood the sentiment of that town. He had given his position away by firing that shot. But what of it! If he killed this man, who would blame him? If he killed him, Slink would be free. For there was no one else in the world who knew who Slink really was.

He raised his gun again. A crowd of women must have seen him this time—although it was dark and there was much confusion.

And one of those women stopped his gesture.

He felt a touch of cold steel against his leathery neck. He held his right arm rigid where he had lifted it.

"Drop your gun," he heard a voice say. He recognized that voice very well. It was calm, sweet, vibrant. He visualized it as coming from a serene but tragic face. The gun clattered to the street.

Nell Brower picked it up. Her one thought then, as before, was not for this rat, but for her wounded lover. She elbowed her way through the crowd that had gathered about.

Slink jumped to his feet, baffled and enraged. A woman had held him up. Luck had been against him; his victim was not yet dead. He came out into the light with the recklessness of desperation.

The crowd saw a misshapen and hideous figure with mouth trembling like a rat that smells danger. They heard a high-pitched, hysterical voice rasping out :

"Finish him up, I tell yer!" Slink was crying. "*He's* the man Powderhorn wants! He's the horse thief! Give him back to the big chief and save yourselves! Don't listen to his damned lies, I tell yer! Leave me, take another pot at him! Finish him up and give his carcass to the Injuns, or we'll all be scalped! Are you all daft? No, don't bind his arm! Kill him—kill the rattler—or we're all lost, so help me God!"

The screeching stopped abruptly. Slink Bottiler saw a man emerge from that group—a young, haggard man with a face gray and terrible.

The town was on Slink's side. But was the town against this adversary?

Bottiler darted a glance down the street, then up. The sheriff had ridden to see what that shot meant. Could the sheriff save him? Could any mortal save him? What if they listened to the truth? What if no one stopped that gaunt wounded man? His head darted this way and that—like a cornered snake. He saw a horse. He leaped for it with an agility that was like magic in that confused light.

He threw the reins over the animal's head and jumped aboard. He did not cross those reins—what reason had he to cross them? He yanked

the horse's head about and swung through a shaft of yellow light from the window of the Rex Hotel.

Sheriff Hornuff, arriving on the scene, noticed now, for the first time since Plunk Reverdy had come from Powderhorn's settlement, that the horse had a face speckled white as with stars.

Yes, Sheriff Hornuff had arrived upon the scene. Old Hornuff, who had ruled that range for thirty years. The man who had judged men, who had freed them, who had hanged them; the man who had kept peace with Powderhorn when Federal Indian agents and army majors had failed. And here he was with a hundred and fifty lives apportioned by God to his stewardship.

Helpless children and frantic mothers surrounded him. The cañon walls echoed with the sound of gunfire. Powderhorn's machine gun at the gateway to Goldpan Gulch was sputtering like a company of riflemen. And yet in that chaos of tragedy old Hornuff noticed the white-speckled face of that horse!

He remembered there was another tragedy as great as the one now besetting the whole town. It was as poignant and vital even though it concerned only one man—and his mate.

And the key to that tragedy was this old peetered-out fuzztail which was the nearest horse to Slink Bottiler when that terror-stricken little hombre made up his mind to leave town.

Just where Slink thought he was going the sheriff could not imagine. Perhaps to hide in some ravine just outside of town. Perhaps even to rush into the hands of the Indians. For that's what would have happened if he had traveled very far. But there he was in the saddle of Reverdy's horse, willing to ride anywhere so long as he could get away from that gray-faced, wounded man.

And what happened then was a sudden unraveling of that youth's tragedy—a tragedy which had so baffled Sheriff Hornuff. The sheriff saw, and every one in that street saw, that Plunk's incredible tale of an old and gentle-looking horse turning into a demon, in the wink of an eye, was true. Without so much as tensing up to throw back or giving the slightest sound by any muscle, the old beast leaped into the air. His hindquarters snapped up; he sunfished and came down on alternate front feet, lurching to the side as well as giving a terrific downright shock.

A little ragged form like a stuffed gunny sack went hurtling through the air, catapulted from the saddle against the wall of the Rex Hotel. Slink Bottiler went so high that he almost hit the gallery in front of the shack. An upright caught him, a thwack against his side, and he fell midway in his flight.

If you threw an egg against a post, and it squashed and fell, it would have simulated the trajectory of Bottiler's flight. It looked as if all

the sheriff's horses and all his men could not have put that carcass of bones and skin together again. At that, the old cayuse was not satisfied. He turned upon the fallen rider like a—well, there is no simile more effective than the truth—like a stallion bent on killing a hated man.

Sheriff Hornuff was impressed—rather slowly, perhaps—that it was his duty to interrupt that bloody scene. He might have shot the maddened brute down; but for some reason or other he admired that horse. He loved him. He wanted to cheer him for what he had done.

He had cleared the stain from Plunk Reverdy's life—an event for which Hornuff had been yearning for every hour of the last two months.

Hornuff jumped for the stallion's bridle. He twisted the bight of the reins about the animal's nose in the form of a tourniquet. Slink Bottler, lying dazed against the gallery post, was saved from the forestriking hoofs.

But had he been fully conscious he would have preferred them to the doom that was in store for him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE RAID

HORNUFF could give no more time to the crisis of that drama—the drama of Plunk Reverdy's life. There were a hundred and fifty other lives at stake. Even now some horsemen were riding up from Goldpan Gulch. Three of the men were wounded.

"They's others down there that's been hit, chief—Joe Wincoop, Barkis, Hornby. We cain't hold it. The firin' from the cañon rim is pickin' us off. In the mornin' when they have light they'll finish us in a jiffy."

"We won't last till mornin'," said another. "You need ten more men down there right now. The bullets are flyin' like bees. They're firin' behind and in front and on all sides and above them boulders—everythin' but chippin' 'em to pieces afore our eyes."

"Don't send me back there, chief. I'll fight—even though I'm creased in the shoulder—but I ain't goin' to fight down there in Goldpan. The whole twenty you posted there will be wiped out in fifteen minutes—"

"And Powderhorn will march in."

"Chief, it's no use. They've got a machine

gun. It's only because they can't use it right that they's any of us left to tell the tale."

"They ain't a spot of sand or clump of mesquite, chief, that ain't red hot with whizzin' lead. A dozen of our men is wounded down thataway, and they can't get home without they pass through that machine gun fire. I got through because they was reloadin'—which it took 'em a convenient long time."

"Six more of you go down to Goldpan Gulch," the sheriff shouted to the horsemen he held in reserve. He turned to the crowd of women. "Put out the lights in every shack 'ceptin in this cantina. Take whoever's hit in that for to be 'tended to. Women and kids get offen the street—like I've ordered a dozen times."

"Git all the buckets you can and fill 'em with water. If Powderhorn gits in he will set fire to the shacks on the edge of town. That don't mean you womenfolk must leave the cantina. Not till I git back and give the order. When the Indians get into town, all men rally around this shack."

The women crowded back to the big dance hall.

Plunk Reverdy stood there with Nell Brower cleansing and binding his wound. Slink Bottiler lay upon the board sidewalk groaning. And there was more groaning on the part of the wounded men as they were helped from their saddles and taken into the vestibule of the hotel. One of Hornuff's mozos stood with the outlaw horse, holding the tourniquet. The old

devil's flanks were trembling, his tail swished, he pawed at the ground. But he was spent. There was no more fight ever seen in him from that night on.

"All right, men—get to your posts," the sheriff commanded. "I'll ride down to Goldpan agin and see how the fight is goin'. Tell whoever you see that we're fightin' now with our backs ag'in' the wall. Cain't spare any more extry men. Got to use em all watchin' the east and west cliffs. Otherwise, Powderhorn's breeds will come trailin' down over 'em like a cascade."

The sheriff was about to wheel his horse and head for Goldpan when Reverdy came down from the sidewalk, staggering slightly.

"Wait a minute, chief."

Hornuff looked down at him. "What's the matter, Plunk. You foldin' up?"

"No, I'm all right. It's only a crease. I want to—"

"You ain't goin to be sent nowhere to do no shootin'! You let that gal take you in and give you a jolt of whisky."

"No, chief. You listen to me—" He clung to the saddlehorn.

"What's the matter, Plunk. You dyin'? You've got a funny look in your face."

"It's the same look you've got in yours, chief. I've listened to everything. And I know what's happening. So do you. We cain't hold 'em off. I can see it in your eyes."

"The hell you can!" the irascible old fellow snorted. "We're killin' six to every one of us which falls. And I'm goin' down to kill six more and then twenty. Brace up—and tell the womenfolk to calm down and be ready with the water."

"Look back there, chief!" Plunk cried. "Powderhorn's busted through the gulch. There's a shack burning."

"Well, the damn, hell-bent, murderous skunks!" the sheriff exploded. "If they touch a single one of our womenfolk, I'll have every breed and Injun in Arizony wiped off'n the earth!"

"It's the machine gun that's opening the way for 'em, chief. You know that."

"I know that our men are showin' yaller. The machine gun's bluffed 'em out, that's what. I'll ride down thar and bust it up with my bare hands!"

He called to two of his deputies. "Get some of them men from the east of town to follow me. The breeds have got into the cañon through the gulch and we got to fight 'em in open ground. Get as many riders as you kin.

"And any of them cantina gals as can tote a gun—let 'em foller. Deploy out in a line. Keep behind boulders and shacks. Wait till the breeds get in as far as the water tower, then pelt 'em."

The women at the door of the cantina spread these words to their companions.

"I kin still fight, chief!" one of the men said who was being helped up the steps of the Rex Hotel.

"So can I, chief," said another. "They've fixed my crease up. My right arm's still kickin'."

"I know how to shoot Injuns, chief!" a kid cried.

A woman in a gingham dress, a white-haired woman; a girl with spangled gown and silk stockings, a radiant girl with black ringlets—I mean Nell Brower—all gathered about the sheriff. They were armed and eager.

They were eager—as the sheriff knew—not so much to fight as to die. For fighting would avail little now.

"Better git some of the Mexes diggin' trenches around the cantina, chief," a deputy suggested. "And make fortifications with barrels and buckboards."

The smoke from the shacks down there toward the gulch was wafted toward them. A red flame revealed the Indians on the cañon rim, riding in an endless file.

"It's too late for diggin' trenches," said old Hornuff. "You women come along with me. I'm goin' to git every fighter we've got and stretch a line from wall to wall of the cañon. It'll be our last line—and remember that while you're fightin'!"

The sheriff wheeled his horse and galloped down the street, followed by the few remaining

horsemen he had. The women who had enlisted trailed along behind, some mounted, others piling into a buckboard.

Nell Brower who had elected herself to be of that heroic number, was the last to leave. She went to Plunk first, helping him tenderly to the door of the Rex Hotel. He sank upon the steps, faint with the loss of blood.

As she kissed him and said good-by, he looked up in astonishment. What did this mean? Nell Brower—and those women going out to fight, while he remained, exhausted, baffled, wounded upon those steps? What a hideous reversal had overtaken them!

“Where are you going, child!” he exclaimed, coming slowly to realize what had happened. “Not down there—”

“Yes.” She was serene. Her voice was at once calm and exultant. Victory had already come. “Don’t try to follow. You can’t use a gun now. I can.”

She had expected that he would prevent her going—or else that he would try to follow. She was surprised that his own voice was like hers—serene, with a strange mixture of resignation and triumph.

“It’s all right, girl. You go on with the sheriff. Protect yourself with that six-gun if they come. But they won’t come. It will all be over soon.” He added as she stepped away—her hands still clutching his.

"You aren't afraid? No, I see that. Don't be afraid. Remember what I say"—he spoke with a tensity that she could not understand—"it'll be over soon. And we'll be together."

She went for the horse, telling one of the old women at the Rex shack to take care of Reverdy.

The old woman came to him.

"Bring me some water," he said.

Several of the women looked at him startled. They could not interpret that voice. "Is he dying?" one asked.

"Yes, most like—no matter. We'll all be there in a jiffy."

They brought him some water. He took it. The flames to the south of the town cast their gleam upon his face. His eyes seemed to light up not so much from that lurid glare as from a fire within. He staggered again to his feet, lifting his weight by clutching at a gallery upright.

Other outlying shacks were burning now. Powderhorn and his breeds had advanced as far as the first ranch inside the cañon. The ranch house and barns, the calf sheds and hay were flaming.

Reverdy felt the soot fall upon his face; he smelled the smoke. The even glow of stars had been erased by that smoke and a fitful light was upon every face—the face of two or three wounded men, of Reverdy, of Slink Bottiler, lying there in the gutter against the board sidewalk.

Plunk Reverdy pointed to that carcass of bones and matted hair and rags.

"Get a riata and tie up that hombre—"

At that moment Slink Bottler was enjoying a sensation of vacuous bliss. It seemed to have taken a long time for his mind to untangle the events that had happened.

He had tried to take the life of the only man who could accuse him. He had failed. He had mounted a horse in the attempt to flee. The horse had thrown him.

Slink had come to with a symphony of glorious sounds vibrating in his ears: women's voices, the singing of a wind, the distant and soul-stirring call of desert wolves. This symphony had gradually dissolved into its true component parts—the yipping of savage Navahos, the bark of guns, the chatter of frantic mothers, the galloping of horses.

In his nostrils was the smell of smoke. Above him the sky was as red as a desert sunrise. Dry sparks mounted in a blossoming whorl. Soot caressed his cheek.

He found himself being bound by a rawhide riata.

Women were leaning over him. He mumbled incoherently: "What-all are you doin'? Bind-in' me? What for? I ain't done nothin'. I'm a poor, unfortunate mucker that never did any hurt. For God's sake, what're you doin' with me?"

He began to scream. His mortal enemy—a gaunt youth with arm in a sling was standing over him. A crowd of women with gingham gleaming

in the strange light were on the sidewalk. There seemed to be a deadly calm in that scene while just beyond, the pandemonium of hell gripped the cañon.

"Bring me a saddle horse. And take the tourniquet off that cayuse's nose, and blindfold him with a gunny sack."

"What-all are you goin' to do with that cayuse, Plunk?" one of the old ranch wives cried. "Don't go near him. He turned bad. He'll kill yer if you go near him."

But Plunk's commands—given in a tense, pained voice—were not to be questioned.

They brought him two saddle horses as he had ordered, and one of the cantina women tied a gunny sack around the old stallion's nose. When the tourniquet was taken off, the beast had transformed himself again into a gentle old stock horse.

"All right now, hombre," Reverdy said to Slink. "Git up to your feet."

"What-all are you going to do with me, Plunk?" the man whimpered. "You ain't goin' to do me hurt, Plunk, are you? You're just! You'll help me. You'll save me from torture, Plunk! I'll do whatever you say—foller you anywheres; be your slave from now on, pard! Because you're a just man and—"

"Put him on that horse and cinch his heels together," Reverdy said.

Slink Bottiler fell to his knees. He gibbered

hysterically at first, then he howled. They took him—and he struggled weakly. His whole performance was a pitiful and insignificant comedy in comparison to the battle down in Goldpan Gulch, to the howling of Navaho gunmen, to the lurid panorama of flame and red cliffs and stormy smoke.

A few minutes later Sheriff Hornuff saw this strange outfit riding down the cañon toward Goldpan Gulch. A wounded youth leading a blindfolded horse, and on the latter a hunched, shapeless thing bound tightly like a sack of bran.

Sheriff Hornuff had deployed all the fighters he had mustered together in a long line, from cañon wall to wall. They were crouched low, hiding behind boulders, sand mounds, in patches of mesquite, behind tree boles, in ravines.

Reverdy could not see how many there were—for the smoke of the burning shacks prevented this. But the line extended for half a mile with flashes of light spurting out every fifty feet. All of Mule Town that could bear arms was in that line. That is to say, all save the men Hornuff had posted on the three other sides of the town to watch the cañon walls. This was the last line of defense. If it broke through, not a man, woman or child in Mule Town would be spared.

Sheriff Hornuff riding up and down the little battle line was the first to see Reverdy approaching.

"Where-all do you think you're headin' for, Plunk?" he asked.

"I'm going to take this hombre to Powderhorn."

"Don't make me laugh."

Slink Bottiler was moaning softly. He was out of his head, like a victim being carried off by a beast of prey. In a circumstance of this sort, so it has been said, the victim is apt to be too dazed for fright.

"Where's the girl?" Plunk asked.

"What girl? Nell? Behind a boulder over there fightin' like hell."

"Tell her that I'll be back," said Reverdy as he dug his heels into the flanks of his mount. The horse sprang down the adobe bank.

The blindfolded stallion with his cargo came stumbling after.

Hornuff dismounted and crawled up to the firing line. He kept under the lee of a boulder, for the Navahos were crawling into the cañon yard by yard. They hurled their streaks of fire from the mesquite patches. Hornuff could catch a glimpse of a ragged form, a tall-peaked sombrero, or the war regalia of a brave. They were getting well within range now, and in a few more minutes the fighting would be hand to hand.

Hornuff got up to his boulder. Two of the women who had enlisted were posted there. One was a rancher's wife, wiry, gnarled, red-faced.

Hornuff knew her well: a woman who quoted Scripture, mended clothes, fed ten ranch hands, and played old-fashioned hymns upon a reed organ.

There she was with a smoking six-gun in her hand.

She was sitting behind the rock — not engaged in battle now. For something had happened to her companion. It was something that had transformed the gnarled ranch woman from a fighter to a sister of mercy and a quoter of Scripture.

Her companion was lying with head in her lap. She was of a different mold. A big-boned girl with a pretty face. She was a cantina dance girl, and she was good at the six-gun under any ordinary circumstances. But now she had been hit.

She was the girl who several years before had inspired Plunk Reverdy to write that song:

Her cheeks like ocotilla,
Whose flowers are red in spring,
But one thing else I'll tell yer, oh, Mr. Buck-
aroo,
Like any cholla cactus she'd stick you
through and through!

Sheriff Hornuff saw that some bullet whizzing through the mesquite had found its mark. The cantina girl lay there in the merciful arms of that ranch woman. There was no gulf between them now. They were, it might be said, two heroic sisters. Sheriff Hornuff proffered his flask. He appeared deliberate. Fighting was going on all along that line — the worst gun-fighting that had

ever been seen or heard of in the Soda Mesa country. But Hornuff acted now as if the climax had passed.

"How long can we hold 'em, chief?" the ranch woman asked. "I want to git this gal home." She was crying hysterically over that poor girl in her arms. This thing that had happened had frightened her. She did not know that a whizzing bullet, leaving scarcely a mark, could work such havoc.

"Stay here a little while longer, ma'am," said Hornuff. "As I've heard you yourself put it wunst—'God's on our side.'"

The ranch woman uttered a prayer.

"How are you, gal?" he asked of the wounded one. "Kin you git a holt on yourself for a while longer? Plunk's gone down the cañon for to see Powderhorn—and he's taken the hoss thief Powderhorn wants."

"I'll hold on all righto, chief," the cantina girl replied. "I want to see Plunk Reverdy once more and hear him play a fandango."

"You'll see him all right, gal," said Hornuff. "If I know anything about ole Powderhorn."

"Praise God! Praise Him all creatures here below!" murmured the ranch woman.

"Thank God for that banjo-playin' kid!" the cantina girl added.

Sheriff Hornuff crawled through the mesquite to the next boulder. He crawled fast, because

his sombrero band gripped his forehead with a sudden twitch, as a bullet cut two neat holes in the crown.

A red rock against which lead spattered and ricocheted took the old man under its wing.

One of the deputies was there, lying on his stomach with a right arm stretched stiffly over the ledge, a six-gun clutched in it, but silent.

The sheriff touched the fellow on the shoulder and there was a groan.

He held the flask to the man's lips.

"How's it goin', pard," Hornuff asked. "I see you're holdin' your own."

"I been servin' a round o' drinks out'n this six-gun every time I seen a flash, chief," the man replied weakly.

Hornuff recognized his voice. It was the barkeep from the Rex Cantina. The last Hornuff had seen of him, he was auctioning off that notorious banjo of Plunk Reverdy's.

"Didn't know I was hit," the man was saying, "till you shook me. Give me another swig."

His finger regained its strength—and as if responding to an urge that had been forgotten for a space of time, the gun barked out, and kicked itself free from the weak hand.

"Don't fight any more, pard," the sheriff said. "You've done your work. It'll all be over soon, I reckon. One way or another. Plunk's gone to to see Powderhorn—takin' with him the hoss thief."

The man sank down as if the suspense of battle had been his only prop. He turned the sheriff's words over and over, then said weakly:

"I got to be goin' home, chief."

"I'll take you home, pard. But you wait here till the fightin's over. I've got to find Nell Brower. Then I'll come back and pack you home."

He turned to crawl into the mesquite again, but the barkeep put a hand upon his shoulder.

"Wait a minute, chief—"

Hornuff was surprised at the changed voice. "Can't you hold out, pard? Where are you hit?"

"You remember that banjo I was auctionin' off to them coots at the dance hall?"

"Never mind that now. Where's you crease? Here in the side? Leave me see if I kin stop it a bit." The sheriff took his bandanna and yanked off his belt. It was pitch dark under the ledge, but he knew a thing or two about this business—even though he had to feel his way.

"If you only last till we git you back home, pard, they'll dress up this crease pronto—and you'll be all right."

"You offered three hundred—or somebody offered three hundred—for that banjo. Ain't I right?" The barkeeper had no response to this. "Is there any other bid? Anything above three thousand? Or three hundred thousand? No use. I wouldn't sell it for the U. J. mine—not me!"

"There you are, pard. That'll keep you from

losin' all your blood till we git you home."

"Not me, no, gents! I'm keepin' that banjo — till I git home. And till Plunk gits home. Been savin' up a speech for a long time, gents. Which I was goin' to deliver same to him. But I got to make up a new speech. It'll take me some time. Ain't much on speechifyin'.

"But I've got the main idea: When I'm dyin', Plunk, I want you to be at my bedside a-playin' this banjo. And I want to hear that good, clean voice of yourn a-singin', 'Down at Old Pedro's Bar!'"

The sheriff crawled off in the darkness. Funny how a little thing like a bandanna handkerchief tightened on a wound with a belt, would worry him, when bullets were whizzing about his ears like hornets.

He found Nell Brower at the next boulder.

What could he tell her?

Her lover had been brought back to her — saved by a mere quip of destiny from Powderhorn's malice. And now he had returned to the jaws of death.

But old Hornuff had a measure of understanding concerning this love of Nell Brower for Reverdy. Hornuff was no fool. He had been in love himself off and on in his youth. Perhaps not with the vehemence which characterized these two "children." Nevertheless he knew what it was. He had not fathered a whole range for so

many years without sharing something of their emotions—of fear or courage or sorrow or love.

"I figure you and him won't have to part agin," he said.

"What do you mean by that, chief!" she exclaimed. She was no fool either. The sheriff was speaking cryptically. Death was all about them, whistling, cracking through mesquite, ripping up the adobe, and once in a while in its trajectory through the dark, it struck home. But the girl was unscathed.

She could not fight, however, because she had no more ammunition.

Then they started talking about Plunk—who had already won his game. No matter if Powderhorn killed him, Plunk had won. The girl and Sheriff Hornuff both agreed on that point.

"You won't part agin," he repeated, "and I mean just what I say."

"No you don't. You mean something else. Is he dying? Did that horse thief's cowardly shot—"

"No—that wound didn't git him. 'Twaren't anything to worry about. But—"

"All right, chief, tell me!" she said under her breath.

"Plunk—he went down to have another palaver with Powderhorn."

There was a long silence at this. Hornuff waited in darkness, his hand on hers.

Then she said: "If he gets killed, I'll—"

Of course, she would make some desperate vow.

He interrupted her. "If he gets killed, gal, why then we'll all git killed. There you are. It's what I mean. You won't be parted agin."

He waited, expecting to hear her sob when she tried again to speak. But there was no trace of breaking down in that cool, gentle voice:

"No," she said, "never again. Never!"

The ordinary duelling between Mule Town's far-flung line, and the forms creeping through the mesquite toward them, was broken by a sudden terrific fusillade.

"They've got that damn machine gun workin' again," Hornuff said. "You stay here, gal. Too bad you ain't got a thirty-eight or I'd fix you up with a round or two. Stay here, anyways. Don't try to back away through the brush. You'll git hit sure. Tuck yourself in under this bowlder and wait—till he gits back."

"You think he'll—"

"Yes. They's a good chanst of his gettin' back. I know Powderhorn. He wants one man. He don't want Mule Town. He knows his tribes will be wiped out if he keeps this fool business up. Wait till Plunk gives him that man he wants. Which you'll see this smoke clear away—and the stars will start in blazin' agin. Powderhorn's a hoss trader. He prefers dickern' to murderin'."

The sheriff left her.

Nell waited unarmed. That is to say unarmed with any finite power.

But there was an illimitable power in her prayer for Reverdy's life. It was like that rock, the strength of which did not lessen with the slugs of lead chipping its edge.

Nell Brower knew it would be the same old red boulder until the stars blazed again.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE TROJAN HORSE RIDES THROUGH

CURIOSITY was the chief weakness of human nature which permitted the famous old Trojan Horse to get within the walls of the enemy.

Reverdy, taking the sacrificial, speckled-face horse of the Navahos through the enemy lines, succeeded because of this universal character trait.

A cloud of smoke from a burning calf-shed covered his advance. Then there appeared before the astonished braves a gaunt and wounded rider holding an arm aloft. By a hackamore he led a blindfolded horse—the very horse which some time before had been designated to bear the dead kinsman of John Powderhorn toward the “Path of Those Above.”

And on this horse there was a burden—which worked violently upon the curiosity of those braves. They were about to fire and riddle with bullets the whole outfit—the two mounts and the burdens they carried.

Powderhorn was waiting, somewhat behind the line of active gunfire. He was seated upon a tree bole—a giant and morose figure with his headband of coyote tails, his grizzly claw necklace and his braided cord which symbolized that he

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had dreamed once upon a time, the Dream of the Jesako.

You might think that John Powderhorn had lulled himself to sleep with the metallic jinglers which he wore to stupefy his enemies. He was immovable—as large as one of those boulders, and as inscrutably silent.

He was not asleep. He was brooding. And he was tortured with thirst.

The effects of his peyote had worn off, leaving him consumed with the fires of hell, as well as of hate.

Now the peculiar thing about John Powderhorn—and perhaps an effect of the drug itself—was to leave him with an obsession. The fixed point about which his numbed mind slowly revolved was that funeral of his sister's son—the comrade who had followed him in many a raid, such as this; who had killed many paleface enemies; who had broken many wild stallions; who had brought home the skin of grizzly bear and puma and deer.

Now if Old John could lay his finger upon the dastard coyote who had caused that brave's death, he would be happy from that moment on. He would never ask a boon again of the Hot Hand or the Good Mind. And his beloved nephew could go on, avenged and free of this sad earth, and hunt bear or skin buffalo to his heart's content throughout eternity.

But what if, after killing all these palefaces, the murderer of his nephew was, by some freak

of luck, not of their number? What actual proof would there be, that of those hundred and fifty white men, the real murderer was one? And without actual proof, what was the satisfaction?

The farther the braves crawled through the mesquite toward Mule Town, the more Old John's mind revolved around this point.

But what could he do? Nothing. He had made a threat, and he must carry it out. If not, any threat he made thereafter would be laughed at as the boast of a failing and aged man. No! A shaman had spoken. Let all the tribes of the world believe.

And now came that extraordinary outfit—two horses and two paleface enemies. They were brought by a dozen braves with a jingle of shoulder talismans, of rein chains, a clip-clop of hoofs, a soft pad of sagebrush shoes.

Old John asked what this claptrap meant. He wanted no prisoners. They were all to be killed.

But this man—the one with arm in sling—had a bargain to propose.

Old John was through with bargains.

But he had likewise a gift to bring to the big chief.

Old John licked his burning lips. He was thirsty. He reached for his canteen, but knowing the effects of water at this juncture, he forbore to drink. Instead he thrust his tongue out for the cooling air.

"Bring 'em paleface to this fire," he said.

The flame of a signal fire of mesquite roots gleamed upon Reverdy.

"Hootch la! Ees you!" he grunted. "Plum cultus paleface. You catch him my cayuse which is for the dead!"

"Here is your horse, big chief," Reverdy said. "I'm bringing him back to you. And with it, I'm giving you this saddle horse as a gift. Two for taking one. That's a good enough bargain?"

Old John's bright little eyes took in the fact that the saddle horse was a very good one. Two horses for one. Yes, that was a bargain that appealed to the horse trader. Old John was a warrior temporarily—and a shaman. But he was a horse trader first and last.

"All paleface of this town—we killem. You think to give me cayuse and buy life? Ees good joker!" He grunted to his warriors. "Killem this paleface dead. But keep the two cayuse."

"One thing else, chief—"

Old John was looking into the sky with his mottled tongue hanging out. "No more pow-wow," he said thickly.

"No powwow," Reverdy admitted. "It is all over. The battle. The palaver. The search. Your man is found—"

Powderhorn raised his hand. It was to stay the guns that were leveled upon Reverdy's breast and back.

"They tell me that before," said the big chief with a grunt. "I findem lie. Can paleface liars

fool shaman who looks into the bodies of the sick and the bad? ”

“They brought me to you,” Reverdy said, feeling a great relief that the muzzles were lowered. “Very good. They lied. But not I. What lie have I told? ”

John Powderhorn looked at him, with blood-shot eyes opening, with tongue lolling.

“What is this carcass like mule pack? ” he asked, nodding to the prisoner.

The prisoner, petrified with fear, had dared say nothing until now. He gibbered for mercy, but not a man could understand him.

“He it was who murdered your nephew, big chief,” said Reverdy.

The gleam of mesquite fire fell on the chief’s great flat countenance. All semblance of human emotion seemed to have been erased from it. It was a vacuous stare—like the stare of a babe attempting to focus its gaze upon something yearned for.

In his own language he mumbled thickly that the bonds be removed from the prisoner.

Slink Bottiler, with red hair damp and clinging to his misshapen skull, fell groveling upon the sand.

Old John could not understand the words of that hysterical plea, but he could very well understand the voice. It was the voice of guilt.

“Don’t mak’ lie to John Powderhorn!” the big chief warned. “John Powderhorn is shaman.

He has swallow' the turtle bones which mak' him see heap sick carcass. I can see the worm in you. If you tellem lie, humph, good! I give you to my squaws. Which is too bad. You tellem truth, then John Powderhorn will show mercy."

One of the big chief's kinsmen came forward. It was one who had seen the murder committed. He explained that when asked to identify Reverdy, he had not been able to do so, for the distance was great, and he had seen only the murderer's back. But now he could swear that he remembered the man. It was this miserable thing on the sand, kneeling and whimpering with fear.

John continued his third degree—a process he always enjoyed.

"My kinsman said you are the man. Hi-yu-skookum. Very good."

This stopped the prisoner's whimpering. He felt his doom closing down irrevocably on his matted red head. He looked up beseechingly to the giant chief, then to the herald-priests, the swift runners with their buffalo horns and painted faces. He looked despairingly for help to everyone, standing in the gleam of that fire. And then he found one face which checked his fear and swerved it into another channel:

"Damn you, Reverdy, for a double-crossin' rat! You're the one as did this! You're the only one in the world as could of done this! You shook my hand as a pard, and then went agin me! You're a lyin', double-dealin', snivelin' rat, you

are! So help me God, I'll ha'nt you for the rest of yer crawlin' life, I will, when I'm gone! "

John Powderhorn's face looked as if he had taken a refreshing drink. He smacked his lips. He grinned. He seemed to be hugely satisfied with what was going on.

"Look here, hombre," Reverdy said quickly. "He knows you're guilty. You confess to him and beg for mercy. Or else it means torture, do you hear? "

Slink Bottiler wrung his trembling knotted hands. He felt like a man half dead, surrounded by a ring of buzzards. He wanted an end put to it all. If he had had that Mexican dagger he usually carried, there was no doubt but that he would have plunged it in his breast.

"Go on, kill me!" he screamed voicelessly. "I done it! I done it ! There you are, damn you all! I done it, but have mercy on me! It was because I was bein' attackted.

"No, I wasn't rustlin' no hoss. Some Injuns sprung out on the chaparral and scairt me stiff! Who'd of done anything else, big chief? Can't yer see my way? I was a poor lonely mucker in Sody Mesa and I—"

Old John was tired of powwows and palavers. A blast of white fire came from his hand. Slink Bottiler received it full in the chest. He made a movement of his hand as if to beg Old John to wait until he had finished.

"You see, big chief—I thought the hoss was

mine. Same kind of brand. But I was—”

His arms went forward, clutching the sand and he sank down, pillowing his cheek and breast there.

Old John turned his back upon the puny death. He ordered his braves to blanket the signal fire, and let it blaze, and smother it again with a wet blanket, according to their code.

The warriors riding the rim and firing into the cañon saw the signal, and in several groups they rode off into the night to their wickiups, their shacks, their night chant and their lodge at Desolation.

“Go back to your town, hombre,” the big chief said to Reverdy. “You give me my man, good. You give me two cayuse, good! This one with gunny sack is plum cultus. No good for dead man’s mount. Buck like hell. Sell him bye’m bye to rodeo company for show buckler.”

He mounted his own horse and called over his shoulder to Reverdy.

“Maybe sometime I drink from ha-ho-wuck with your sheriff, what you call him loving-cup. Not now. Can’t drink something for two days. Heap fire in belly. Chew gum is good.” He licked his lips. “Say good night to sheriff. Heap silly man. Why don’ he give me what I ask for in first place?” He grunted. “Bye’m bye we smoke peace pipe. Old John stay peaceful hombre for while—maybe so.”

The calf pens, brush corrals, bunkhouses, belched their final gasps of flame, leaving glowing skeletons of rafters, braces and uprights. These collapsed in a splendid whorl of sparks, then lay smoldering like a scattering of signal fires.

In that uneven light of Goldpan Gulch and the Boulder Wash there was a confusion of horses wheeling off, of the wounded lifted up and helped to saddle, of women in bright calico dresses and grim men in tall-peaked sombreros taking the many trails through boulder and sage and thorn.

Toward the desert into which Goldpan Gulch opened, slinking forms were swallowed in the darkness of the arroyos and the Desolation trail.

The smoke of the conflict cleared from the cañon.

High above in the ribbon of sky between the cliffs you could see the steady gleam of planets, and the growing brilliance of the Big Bear.

Reverdy found her where Sheriff Hornuff had told her to wait, near a great boulder in the dry creek bed.

It was a magnificent rock upon which the machine gun had spattered its futile lead.

She did not see him until he loomed up before her in the starlight, waist deep in sage. Then she got to her knees, and opened her arms to him.

Reverdy staggered forward. He was spent with the gruelling of the last hour—the past days—his contest at Desolation with the demon-horse, his fight with Bottler, his wound, the

nerve-twisting strain of that palaver with old John Powderhorn.

And he was spent in soul as well as in body. For days he had been flayed by the glances of every fellow man. Those wounds could not heal in one half hour except by a miracle. But the miracle had happened.

He leaned against the boulder to support his weight. Then her voice came to him and he saw her hands reaching out in the starlight.

"We're all at your feet," she said, weeping. "We're all kneeling. You've got the whole world here before you! Your name is a name which no one will ever forget!"

"The world? What of that! It was for your sake, girl, that I cared about that name — because I want you to bear it."

"You are giving me the most precious gift ever offered to a woman," she said. "It is worth more than the whole world."

He fell forward in a soul-satisfying surrender of will and strength.

He was on his knees before her, sinking as she took him in her arms.

THE END

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